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BECAUSE WONDER WILL ALWAYS GET US THERE:
DIRECTING LAUREN GUNDERSON'S *SILENT SKY*

by

JAMES C. VAN OORT

A THESIS PAPER SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IN
DIRECTING

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO
MANKATO, MINNESOTA

APRIL 2021

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This thesis paper has been examined and approved.

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This document represents three years of study which I never thought I'd be able to undertake. Times were such that a graduate degree not only seemed a part of anyone's plan but mine, but also seemed unrealistic due to having been gone from academia for so long. There are several people I must thank for giving me the requisite pushes I didn't know I needed.

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Arigatou gozaimashita Patten Sensei.

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ABSTRACT

Van Oort, James C., M.F.A. *Because Wonder Will Always Get Us There: Directing Silent Sky*.

Mankato: Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2021

This document is a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree in theatre. It is a detailed account of author James C. Van Oort's artistic process in directing Lauren Gunderson's *Silent Sky* in a studio production of the play at Minnesota State University, Mankato, in the fall of 2020. The thesis chronicles the director's artistic process from preproduction through performance in five chapters: a preproduction analysis, an historical and critical analysis, a production journal, a post-production analysis and a process development analysis. Appendices, works cited and works consulted are included.

CHAPTER 1

PREPRODUCTION ANALYSIS: FAITH IN GRAND OBSERVATION

“There’s a new theory. A German physicist...he says that mass and energy are just different forms of the same thing. They shift back and forth forever. So nothing’s gone. It just shifts.”

—Henrietta Leavitt, *Silent Sky*

This chapter will contain a preproduction analysis of *Silent Sky* by Lauren Gunderson. This production will be performed from September 16-20, 2020, in the Andreas Theatre on the Minnesota State University, Mankato campus. Scenic design and projection design will be by Grace Ricard, costume design by Ethan Hayes, lighting design by Ryan Hedman, sound design and original music composition by Frank Vondra and technical direction by Philomena Schnoebelen. The production stage manager will be Reina Beisell and assistant stage manager will be Emma Anderson. The intent behind this chapter is to examine major design elements, provide a structural play analysis, discuss concepts for the production and highlight important elements of the play.

The play is written in a contemporary fashion with two acts made up of multiple scenes. Settings include the Harvard College Observatory Second-Floor Offices, the Leavitt home in Wisconsin, an ocean liner on the Atlantic, Henrietta Leavitt’s home in Cambridge, MA and what Gunderson refers to as a star field—a mystic, nameless space where Henrietta is able to narrate passages of her life, describe her ideas, escape from reality to fantasy and experience her vision of Heaven. Gunderson suggests sets remain simple, representational and flexible with stars shining constantly.

Characters include the historically-important female astronomer Henrietta Leavitt, an ambitious and brilliant scientist in her early 30s, who wears a period-appropriate hearing aid to assist with her deafness. She is joined by two other historically-important women: the astronomer and women's suffragist Annie Jump Cannon, in her 40s, the supervisor who serves as a leader and friend to Henrietta; and astronomer Williamina Fleming, in her 50s, a Scottish immigrant noted for cataloguing thousands of stars and discovering the Horsehead Nebula in 1888. Margaret Leavitt, a composer and "homebody," as Gunderson describes her, in her 30s, is the fictitious sister of Henrietta. Peter Shaw, the fictitious head astronomer's apprentice at Harvard and love interest of Henrietta, is in his 30s and also serves as an allegorical representation of men in this story of women and their work, lives and struggles.

Act 1 covers several years in swift passages: Scene 1 begins in 1900 and Scene 3 begins in 1905. From Scene 3 to the end of Scene 6, another five years passes. Act 2 experiences this quick passage of time as well, beginning in 1910 for Scene 1 and advancing to 1918 in Scene 4; from here to the end of the play, two more years pass. This passage of time often takes place while Henrietta and her fellow astronomers record their findings in their office space and usually incorporates written letters, telegrams, lectures or private reflections from the characters. Time seems to slow or quicken as Henrietta retreats into her star field fantasy space. As the play is written, years may pass in just a few lines, time may stand still or pages and pages of dialogue might include little or no time at all.

Music is an important element of this play as Margaret is a pianist and composer. Gunderson notes that Margaret's piano composition and playing should be or seem to be live and singular but become "a fully encompassing sound as the stars take over"

(Gunderson 4). Original music has been composed specifically for the play by Jenny Giering, and Gunderson makes note of this.

Importantly, Gunderson specifically notes photographic negative glass plates depicting certain specific sections of the night sky and the positions of stars as a necessary property. These are the plates the women use to do their work by use of a star spanker—another singular property element—used to determine a star’s luminosity as indicated on the photographic plates.

Gunderson indicates preferred pronunciations of three astronomical terms: Magellanic, or MAJ-eh-LAN-ic; Cepheid, or SEH-fee-id; and Andromedae, or an-DRAH-muh-DIE. She also offers a website for research and images at www.SilentSkyPlay.tumblr.com.

Silent Sky gives us a somewhat transcendental account of a slice of Henrietta Leavitt’s life from 1900 to 1920 and provides glimpses into the excitement of discovery, the frustrations we find in ourselves and others and human need to drive forward with our endeavors in the face of oppression or lack of recognition. The fact that Henrietta is deaf (a trait she shared, in fact, with her colleague Annie Cannon in life but not in this play) is one that is exhibited but not overwritten, seemingly not intended to be overplayed. If anything, Henrietta’s utilitarian and whimsical use of her hearing aid—particularly her chiding threat to take it out when annoyed by Peter—adds a comedic feel at times and a fantastical feel at others. We often “hear” her deafness as she takes the hearing aid out and the sounds of her star field take her to that other place or allow her to concentrate solely on her work. There is also an implied connection to the “sounds of deafness” and the “sounds of space”—two incongruities that, in this script, make perfect sense and are offered in sensory sound

elements. Gunderson has made this a sublime character enhancement rather than a limiting handicap.

The altered speed of time, the mystical though scientific language Henrietta uses, the suggestion of a representational set with stars all around, the existential questions posited by the characters balanced against scientific discipline, discovery and truth—all these things lead a reader or spectator to appreciate the “magic” of science. A certain humanistic “mystical science,” not quite the same style as the Magical Realism contributed by the Latinx community but similar in flavor, suggests a realistic style approach orbited by sweeping, dream-like moments of sheer fantasy. As an example, a stichomythic passage in Act 2 Scene 4 shows Henrietta describing her Heaven to the more earthy but religious Margaret: “My Heaven? Is a cosmos deep in a gorgeous void...full darkness...mottled with immaculate combustion...hot gas in a lonely...broad, airless...deep, vast dark” (Gunderson 54).

This passage continues through Margaret’s questioning of where her Christian idea of Heaven belongs, making peace with whether or not that Heaven exists and what it means to mean something, to have a legacy. As the conversation becomes more tense, Henrietta bemoans that she’ll never finish her work; Margie retorts “that’s what a legacy is...the way I see it, and this is just how I see it. You asked God a question and He answered. That’s the meaning of meaning for most of us.”

This theme of spirituality and science with and against one another comes as soon as the audience or readers encounter Henrietta’s first lines:

Heaven’s up there, they say. Pearly clouds, pearly gates, they say. They don’t know

much about astronomy, I say. 'The science of light on high. Of all that is far-off and lonely and stuck in the deepest dark of space. Dark but for billions and billions of...Exceptions. And I insist on the exceptional (Gunderson 9).

Another signifier of the spiritual tug-of-war Henrietta and Margaret fight is in the multiple references and arguments they have over the Bible. Margaret tells Henrietta that when she goes off to Harvard, she should take a Bible; Henrietta flippantly remarks that "Harvard has those" (Gunderson 12). Later on, in a star field scene in which the sisters converse through letters, Margaret indicates their father sent a book. Henrietta exclaims "Oh no, a Bible?" to which Margaret responds, "If it were a Bible I would've said Bible—It's a book" (Gunderson 24). The impression isn't that Henrietta is trying to offend Margaret; rather, that her sensibilities on Heaven and the afterlife are scientific and not religious in nature. While the two never engage in a full-fledged argument for or against Christian scripture, Gunderson allows the issue to be one that the sisters broach superficially in their present, but probably much more deeply in the past.

The concept of relativity is a central tenet of Henrietta's idea of Heaven. She indicates in Act 1 Scene 6 that Einstein says "...mass and energy are just different forms of the same thing. They shift back and forth forever. So nothing's gone. It just shifts" (Gunderson 38). This offers Henrietta a sense of peace—scientifically if not theologically—and perhaps a metaphor for her "Heaven" while trying to explain her beliefs to Margaret. This shifting from mass to energy is referenced again in the final moments of the play just before the deaths of all the characters are explained—Henrietta indicates that she is out of time. "But light has never let me down. And so. I shift" (Gunderson 61). The audience

watches as each character in his or her way shifts—a representative shift from mass to light. Finally, Henrietta—surrounded by light—becomes a star herself.

The theme of striving forward in the face of oppression is evident in several forms. There are themes of rising above a physical ailment or disability, resisting oppression, a fight for equal rights and the case for doing one's work if it makes her life complete regardless of the outcome.

In the first realistic contact we have with Henrietta following her opening star field soliloquy, Margaret runs undetected to her sister and pinches her to get her attention. She had her hearing aid out and couldn't hear Margaret's approach, and the two banter innocently about it. Margaret indicates to Henrietta that since she had her hearing aid out, she was "fair game" (Gunderson 9) and Henrietta takes it without any injury. In Act 2 Scene 2, as Henrietta listens to Peter Shaw orienting her to the office in his unintentionally condescending manner, she indicates that she could take the hearing aid out if he chose to continue orienting—a humorous use of her disability, used to her advantage in this case, to free herself from his further condescension (Gunderson 15). Once she begins working in the observatory later that scene, Henrietta takes out her hearing aid and we hear, for the first time, the vacuum of her deafness. Here, she makes use of her deafness in order to concentrate on the work at hand and to eliminate background noise. After she gains approval to work into the night, Henrietta is discovered at her desk by Annie—who sees her at an emotionally vulnerable moment with her hearing aid out. This leads to an awkward exchange between the two, but also the first real connection between them. This use of the hearing aid as an aural accoutrement lessens as Act 1 goes on to its end and Act 2 begins; the hearing aid becomes more a device allowing Henrietta to go from her star field fantasy world

when it is out to the reality of this world when it is in. With only a few examples of the deafness as a disability, Gunderson has implied we should use it as a tool for Henrietta, not as a weakness. Arguably, this deafness adds dimension to the character that other characters cannot experience—an interesting thought.

There are multiple oppressors being resisted in this play. Notably, Henrietta and her colleagues are living and working in a world dominated by men between the years 1900 to 1920. Regardless of the fact that Henrietta has at least as much talent, education and drive as Peter Shaw, the fact that he is a male installs him as a supervisor of the female characters on general principle—not for any other reason—in this era. Gunderson uses some spiky moments to punctuate this. In his first meeting with Henrietta, Peter is abrupt and unintentionally rude with an implied sexist arrogance that isn't necessarily his as much as it is of the time's mores and norms. As he continues to orient Henrietta with her workspace and the job she'll be doing, his continued ingrained sexism unfolds but does so to his own embarrassment; Gunderson uses this masterfully to comment on the sexism Leavitt and others suffered in their time. It's beautiful how Henrietta parries Peter's every attempt at smoothing over his embarrassing verbal ejaculations. The point Henrietta makes is not lost when she tells Peter that astronomy is her passion and he is unable to understand what she means: to him, it's a career; to Henrietta, it is a life, a discipline, a passion. Nonetheless, the sexism of the era restricts Henrietta to the second-floor offices in a job recording scientific data instead of making her own discoveries by use of the tools reserved for the male faculty of the institution.

Most of Peter's early comments are sexist by nature. He refers to the attic office as "quite a women's world," calls the women "(Dr.) Pickering's Harem," insinuates that 25

cents per hour is good pay “for women’s work.” Gunderson created Peter as the representative of men in a male-dominated society, but she slaps him around in both comedic and dramatic ways. He admits his father pulled strings to get him the job. In Act 1 Scene 3, while discussing Einstein’s new Theory of Relativity with Williamina and Annie, he bemoans the fact that Henrietta “found something—is finding—uncovering, discovering—and I...don’t know what that’s like. Which makes me think I’m not very good at this. And things might just be too...strange” (Gunderson 30). Later, in more dramatic fashion, his attacks against Henrietta for not being a real astronomer and not being able to continue with her own work as it now resides in the hands of men become severe; more akin, probably, to the world in which Leavitt lived. He offers a lecture to his students in Act 2 Scene 1 as Henrietta goes to her star field; another beautiful stichomythia reveals not only Henrietta’s search for meaning in life but also Peter’s horrible incompetence as a scientist:

PETER: The cosmic question of our age—

HENRIETTA: What is “the point?”

PETER: What is “the universe?” The questions itself admits a singularity of size—
We are stuck—

HENRIETTA: We are stuck—

PETER: On this planet.

HENRIETTA: In this life. And our perspective is—

PETER: Our perspective is—

HENRIETTA: Intimate.

PETER: Imperfect.

HENRIETTA: Which means that I might have forgotten—

PETER: However—

HENRIETTA: To live.

PETER: Because we lack the measurements, we are left wondering: How big is everything? Which leads to the central question—is everything contained within our Milky Way or not?

HENRIETTA: Are we contained or not?

PETER: Is all that we see—

HENRIETTA: Is all that we see—

PETER: The extent of the universe?

HENRIETTA: The extent? No. No.

PETER: Absolutely. (Gunderson 47)

Fortunately for the character of Peter, his lovely whimsical nature pulls him back from the harsh reality of the era and into a more lovable character as the play reaches its end. Gunderson gives Peter the task of announcing to Henrietta that her work has led Danish Astronomer Ejnar Hertzsprung to calculate the distances of certain Cepheid stars at “thousands and thousands of light years away” (Gunderson 58). He ends this wonderful revelation with a touching but bittersweet admission that while he was completely wrong about the size of the universe, “I am so proud to know you” (Gunderson 58). Gunderson writes in her directions that this is, for Peter, his way of saying “I have always loved you.” Ultimately, though Peter is a vehicle through which male oppression drives in the play, he joins Henrietta in the final scene as one of her most beloved kindred spirits.

The character of Annie Cannon is another character—a historically-based one—that indicates not only women’s struggle against male dominance but an overcoming of sorts.

She begins the play in 1900 as a staunch, resolute woman who runs the computing department as a dedicated employee of the never-seen Dr. Pickering. At the plays end, she has fought for and won the right to vote, working and marching as a suffragette in support of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Her character arc completely changes from staunchly subservient in her duties to freely flaunting women's rights and women's contributions to the world. These arcs are more static in the other women: Margaret adheres to her traditionally-accepted role in the family and finds comfort therein; Williamina, boisterous and strong throughout, isn't ever afraid to show dominance over Peter either seriously or in jest. She has a wonderful monologue against Peter in Act 1 Scene 3 as she explains Henrietta's passion for her work even without the advantages the men of the department have:

And you know why she's got something? Because she's not just doing (her job).

Because she knows she's not getting anything handed to her except the corner of someone else's chance. Because we can't use that apparently hyper-sexed telescope you boys get to, but the mind is sexless and so is the sky—are you made nervous by how many times I've said the word sex? (Gunderson 30).

Finally, there is the theme of the indomitable human spirit. The word "spirit" is intentional not as a metaphysical entity inherent to humans nor as a force within humans propelling them toward a goal or an endgame but both. It could be said this spirit or force is the drive through which a person establishes her passion for what she does. It could be said, perhaps, this passion becomes the essence of her. The essence escapes her. It is larger than she is and continues though she has long ago shifted to another form. There is sure to be a

mystic equation herein—a Pythagorean thing both transcendental and grounded. Henrietta is that in *Silent Sky*.

Her first monologue indicates Henrietta sees more to her science than work. The fact that she speaks of her scientific prerogative contrasted with a metaphysical Heaven tells the audience that she sees this certainly as equal—not beneath—theological belief. Artists might express similar prerogatives as regard their art; perhaps equating the creative process of sculpting a statue from marble to a deity creating man from earth. The drives and passions of any scientist, artist or innumerable other callings could be placed among those forceful pressures erupting forth from what might be called a soul. Considering this artistically, Henrietta is at her very soul a scientist.

Henrietta's drive to begin her work is presented to her sister on a Sunday morning outside a church where Margaret is the pianist and their father is the preacher. Henrietta shows her sister a letter from Harvard asking her to come to work—this amounts, allegorically, to Henrietta telling her sister that her calling is pulling her away from her, her family, her community. Importantly—being as they are outside the church—she is being pulled away from theology. This will be a point of contention between the sisters for the remainder of the play. The motif of the recurring Folliot S. Pierpont hymn “For The Beauty Of The Earth” is one example of Henrietta and Margaret orbiting this point throughout their lives and perhaps provides solace to Margaret—the earthier of the two sisters. Many verses sung by Margaret offer allegorical comments on their relationship; there is an astronomically-interesting verse including “sun and moon and stars of light” (Pierpont).

Onward, Henrietta presses to the Harvard College Observatory where she hopes to use the Great Refractor Telescope in her work. She is quickly informed by Peter that the

telescope is off limits to women; a sudden interruption by Annie and Williamina breaks the tension with Peter that may have resulted in Henrietta walking away from the job. A description of the role of a computer—as Annie explains, “one who computes”—is offered with further discussion about the importance of the work. “We collect, report, and maintain the largest stellar archive in the world,” Annie explains, “and we resist the temptation to analyze it” (Gunderson 19). Though this is not the work she longed for, Henrietta settles in with Annie and Williamina recording data for the men of the institution.

As she records data on the Small Magellanic Cloud, Henrietta noted a frequency of pulsing in the Cepheid stars related to their brightness. She shows Annie her findings and Annie allows Henrietta to stay after normal working hours to continue her research—the first real victory Henrietta has achieved in pressing forward. She works through the night oftentimes; in Act 1 Scene 3, Peter and Williamina enter to discover Henrietta sleeping at her desk with stacks of newly-registered Cepheids. This work becomes questionable to her, though, as she has no way of applying her findings to other research herself. “I’m going on two thousand of them,” she tells Annie in Act 1 Scene 4. “And I’m starting to think it’s like counting grass. You can count it, but why?” As she begins to feel this research is in vain, Henrietta receives her first encouragement from Annie:

ANNIE: You’re close. Keep working. Think about how you’re thinking. It’s in there...Miss Leavitt, I think you’re in the middle of it.

HENRIETTA: Of what?

ANNIE: That chance. (Gunderson 32)

This exchange leads into a conversation between Henrietta and Peter—the first romantic encounter between the two as well as an affirmation by Henrietta that her work is more important than romance.

Back in Wisconsin, Henrietta's father suffers a stroke and she is summoned home by Margaret. Margaret challenges Henrietta's lack of attention to her family over the past several years. She indicates to Henrietta that she has written letters, signed from Henrietta, to her now ailing father as Henrietta has neglected to maintain contact with the family. Henrietta agrees she will stay in Wisconsin as long as Margaret needs her—this causes a long disruption of her relationship with Peter. The romance is over before it is even started. However, as Henrietta works on her star plates and Margaret practices her concerto on the piano, Henrietta discovers that the pulsing of the Cepheids is tonal and patterned.

Act 2 sees Henrietta return to Harvard after a beautiful star field fantasy with Peter; in the real world, she finds Peter aloof, cold and now married to another woman. He explains that her work has been handed off to a group of men for further study, leading to an insulting argument between them which is stopped by Williamina. Peter goes so far as to say Henrietta is not a real astronomer. Instead of dwelling on the double insult of Peter's withdrawn affection and the sexist insults he hurls at her, Henrietta demands of her colleagues a reason why they should continue working without finding any answers. "If we're not finding the largest truth then what have we spent our lives doing? What's the point of all this?" (Gunderson 47). She confronts Peter after his lecture and announces she is leaving on an ocean liner, not wanting to waste any more of her time.

Henrietta returns to Boston after an uncertain but lengthy amount of time. She meets Margaret at the harbor and suffers a medical ailment; although Margaret wants her to

see a doctor, Henrietta explains she saw a doctor in London and only wants to get back to work. Margaret insists there will be time later; Henrietta insists there will not be—the first indication that Henrietta’s time is coming to an end. The play doesn’t tell us what is ailing Henrietta, only that she knows her days are numbered. Her sole desire is to continue working, which she does from her home in Cambridge, MA. She receives a promotion and a raise of a quarter per hour and is informed by Peter that her work has finally been used to calculate distance to the Cepheid stars—thousands and thousands of light years away. He also indicates that a man named Hubble has shown profound interest in Henrietta’s work. When Annie and Williamina are given this information, the three whisk Margaret and Henrietta off to break into the observatory to see—for the first time ever—what the heavens look like through the Great Refractor Telescope.

The drive to learn more and see her research applied to the work of her contemporaries—even knowing she could not take part in the work or benefit from the work during her lifetime—pressed Henrietta forward even up to the moment of her death. In the play, the escape to the observatory and the moments of each characters’ death are displayed in a transcendental explanation of large-scale human achievement as well as intimate individual success. In the play, Henrietta tells us what happens in the field of astronomy as a result of her work; of course, in life, Henrietta barely got to see how her work was being applied.

A deep thrust staging configuration in the Andreas Theatre will be used for this production. The configuration lends itself to a theatrical telling of the story, allowing both realism and fantasy to exist in the same space—while a realistic scene and setting may be present in one area of the stage, a completely separate fantastic scene and setting may occur

elsewhere. This will also allow for scenes of various styles to play in suggested settings in multiple parts of the stage. The idea is that one space will be used for the Harvard Office scenes, one for the Wisconsin home and one for the Massachusetts home; the ocean liner and star field scenes, being largely fantasy, will occur in multiple areas and potentially over the entire space. This gives the realistic scenes a specific home on the stage while the fantasy can occur anywhere and everywhere, connecting all the spaces in a transcendental spaceless timelessness.

The set should be simple and representational. The overarching idea of cosmic transcendence and the science of the cosmos should be omnipresent even if undercoated with realism (i.e. a paint treatment representing the universe or astronomy underlying/overlapping realistic set pieces). This could include zodiacal or circumpolar constellations, astronomical equations, or the names of stars and galaxies in the design. Such a large space could be broken up with the use of levels although care should be given not to create several small and broken acting spaces with levels instead of allowing for a large acting space that can be restricted with light or furniture. As the playwright indicates in several notes throughout the script, stars are present throughout the play and could be manifest in the scenic and lighting designs. The use of projections is of notable interest should this not infringe on the physical set or the lighting design; scenic and lighting designers should work together in determining a best way forward in this regard. Projections may assist with the indication of specific places (the Wisconsin home, the Harvard Offices, etc.) as well as provide images of the night sky. The realistic and the fantastic should both be enhanced if projections are used. Set pieces should be simple and representational, taking up the least amount of space as necessary to impress upon an audience what it represents (i.e. an office

desk need not be a teacher's desk but a small secretary or table). The office furniture should feel second-hand and offer the notion that the women are making do with what they have scrounged from attic storage. Furniture in the Wisconsin and Massachusetts homes should be representative of simple but amply furnished homes with nothing too ornamental (i.e. no doilies or throw pillows). The necessity of cast members moving set pieces quickly is probable, so the simple design of each piece trumps ornaments and flourishes.

Lighting design must enhance picturization in realistic and fantastic scenes. The use of omnipresent stars may include lighting design in tandem with scenic elements. As many types of star presentations—from one lonesome star to the vastness of the night sky—are included, a projection design element may prove beneficial. Colors used should emulate the colors of the cosmos with attentive research into nebulae, star systems such as galaxies and clusters and other cosmic phenomena like supernovae. Transitions should have a magical feel to them. Light design will be important to the ocean liner scenes, possibly providing a moving ocean surface on the stage. An early 20th century lighting feel should be present in the office scenes if possible—temperature, color and intensity should be considered for this. In the star field scenes, the design should emulate the feel of a night sky in an undefined space; the characters appearing in this star field may move around this space or be isolated in a direct-address spot in certain instance, such as the narration of letters or telegrams.

While there is no sound in space, it is desired to have a stylized theme which conjures thoughts of space. Examples of an original composition written for the play are included at www.dramatists.com and are mentioned in the first pages of the script. A piano is played by two characters; a decision will need to be made in conjunction with the scenic designer whether to use a real or faux piano. Musical passages and individual notes are

played at various times. Another important facet to the design includes Henrietta's hearing aid. This could be melded with the "sound of space" idea mentioned above—when Henrietta removes her hearing aid, everything softens in reality but perhaps there is a deafness soundscape to be considered. This soundscape may be similar or identical to the space theme. It is an important aural way to connect the main character to the space theme and what she hears when she studies the stars. The ocean liner should also be considered in realistic and fantasy scenes—there is one instance of Henrietta being on an ocean liner and the rest are in the star field. Natural ocean sounds and perhaps a music soundscape emulating music and technology of the early 20th century might be appropriate depending on design research.

Costume design should reflect a realistic early 20th century American style. This should be reflected in all aspects of costume, hair and makeup. Special pieces include a suffragette sash and women's pants are worn in differing scenes by Annie Cannon. A hearing aid of the same period is used by Henrietta. Colors should reflect those of the period but also provide harmony with scenic and lighting designs as much as possible. Identifiers for each character (Henrietta's academic look vs. Margaret's lifestyle as a homebody) should be noted.

An array of letters and telegrams are necessary in multiple scenes. The properties master will also need to provide notebooks, stationery and writing instruments suitable to the period. Careful research of what stationery, pens and pencils were used is necessary. Some challenging items to be considered—possibly fabricated—include the glass star plates and star spankers used by the characters. The star plates are photographic glass tiles about the size of a windowpane according to the script. On these plates, negative images of the

stars are captured by Harvard College Observatory's Great Refractor Telescope. The stars appear on these plates as black dots and smudges. It is important to note that one of these plates is broken in every performance—a mindfulness toward safety and the practicality of cleaning broken glass while a scene is ongoing must be considered. The star spankers are handheld instruments by which the characters determine a star's luminosity as compared to a representative marking on the spanker. This is how they translate what is on the glass plates to their figures in their ledgers; it is also how Henrietta begins to see the same star changing in brightness over a known amount of time, so it is key to the story. Additional properties should include books, boxes for the star plates and suffrage pamphlets. Overall, properties should be sparse and used only when necessary. Exceptions to this might include Henrietta's desk, where letters and telegrams appear at a moment's notice as she works.

The far-reaching point being expressed is one of perseverance despite oppression. It is desirable that the story of Henrietta Leavitt impresses upon audiences a feeling that though we struggle mightily and perhaps desperately, we do not struggle in futility even if we cannot enjoy the fruits of our work. The urge of the indomitable human spirit is a pressure that foments change—even if a change isn't needed or known to be needed. The things we do and our deeply personal feelings toward having to do anything impacts and affects others—whether one or two people or the entire world—and nothing is too little. No one is too little. Our dreams and the pursuit of them—even if never realized—make a difference. Our work toward those dreams will empower others, and regardless of how and when we lay down our working tools, we are the stuff of stars and what we have done matters.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS: MEASURED IN LIGHT

Lauren Gunderson's play *Silent Sky* premiered at South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, CA, April 1, 2011 and was her second play to premier at SCR. Since this time, Gunderson's popularity as a playwright has grown. She currently has twenty-one plays to her credit. According to Howard Sherman in an article for *The Stage*, Gunderson had thirty-three plays in production during the 2019/2020 season. She topped *American Theatre* magazine's list of most-produced playwrights in 2019. Twice in a three-year period, Gunderson was the most-produced playwright excluding Shakespeare (once in 2017, again in 2019); for the one year in that time she was not at the top of the list, she was second (Sherman).

Gunderson began writing plays in high school; one of her plays accepted by the Young Playwrights Festival in New York. She continued writing and was accepted at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, where she studied Creative Writing, earning her Bachelor of Arts in 2004. She wrote and acted during her undergraduate studies. In 2009 she graduated from the New York University Tisch School of the Arts with a Master of Fine Arts degree in Dramatic Writing. Her first professional production, *Parts They Call Deep*, was staged at Atlanta's Essential Theatre when Gunderson was but seventeen years old.

In a 2019 *Washington Post* article, Celia Wren notes that Gunderson can't trace her attraction to the theatre but suspects it started when she was in grade school. "But she recalls," Wren writes, "that during a Georgia childhood that included an elementary school production of *Goldilocks* (she played Baby Bear), she was smitten with the power of onstage

storytelling” (Wren). In high school, Gunderson began writing plays—she found a wellspring of material in the history of science and, according to Wren, attributes this to a teacher who focused on scientists who made groundbreaking discoveries. This focus on people, no doubt, made historical figures such as Henrietta Swan Leavitt, Williamina Fleming and Annie Jump Cannon intriguing subjects for Gunderson once she encountered material about them.

Her formative years as a playwright involved some grasping in the dark. “I didn’t have a ton of structural training,” she said. “I didn’t know the landscape of American theatre. I knew the interiority of my own head and I knew my keyboard and my computer” (Sherman).

Having graduated from NYU’s Tisch School, she left New York and attended the O’Neill Playwrights Conference as well as other residencies and workshops. She eventually moved to San Francisco and has remained there. In 2011, one year after moving there, Gunderson had five plays in production in San Francisco, including premieres of *Exit*, *Pursued by a Bear* and *I and You*. While she has been named the most-produced playwright twice, her work has never been produced on Broadway—a fact Sherman notes as revealing the “New York-centric thinking” that pervades the industry (Sherman).

Generally, Gunderson stays away from negative and dark material as a subject matter. She likes historical scientists, women who prove their strength and great worth through a certain vulnerability and tenderness:

I have what I think of as a hard hope at the end of most of my plays. Whatever you have been through in that play, you can come out of it feeling like it didn’t work out

perfectly, and the world isn't a happy place for everyone, but it's worth living. It's worth fighting for good things (Sherman).

As is the case in *Silent Sky*, Gunderson likes theatricality, spectacle, and twists at the end. There's also something classic about it according to Chad Jones, writing for *American Theatre* in 2013.

Preparing for a production of *Silent Sky* for TheatreWorks in Palo Alto, CA in the 2013/2014 season, Gunderson spoke about Jennifer Le Blanc's portrayal of Margaret in a conversation that speaks to her approach to the history and type of people her characters are. "...you have to have something traditional about you to play the role of a traditional older sister 100 years ago," Gunderson said. "[Le Blanc] can bring a sense of humor to this play, which is neither too modern nor too classic" (Jones).

For her part, Le Blanc notes that Gunderson's treatment of a character is charming but deep. Margaret's role "as a mousy, motherly role of an older sister trying to take care of a rogue younger sister becomes, in Gunderson's hands, something more" (Jones).

She captures women from a different era and makes them completely relatable to the modern mind. My dream role would be like that, a woman from history brought to life by Lauren, shown in all her passionate glory (Jones).

Gunderson's writing style produces characters much like herself, according to Bo Emerson, writing for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in 2018. He quotes an article from *The New Yorker* which indicated "a typical Gunderson protagonist resembles her author: smart, funny, collaborative, optimistic—a woman striving to expand the ranks of a male-dominated profession."

The idea of historical and strong women in plays is a Gunderson touchstone and one that involves a polite pressure. In a field where stories often revolve around male protagonists and antagonists, Gunderson finds that—while it shouldn’t be necessary to do so—asking the question “why” can achieve positive results:

Getting theatres to stage more plays about women is sometimes a matter of simply asking, “so, how many of your plays are about women?” Once they count, it often surprises them, and they start to correct themselves. Being diverse is not just a chance to do the “right” thing but it will make your seasons more compelling, your stories more valuable, and the performances more impactful (Emerson).

Similar to her desire for plays with strong female characters, science is a topic Gunderson has frequently used as a backdrop. *Background* tells the story of Ralph Alpher; *The Half-Life of Marie Curie* focuses on the importance of Marie Curie’s work and discoveries.

“I don’t think we’ll ever be done talking about science,” Gunderson said, noting how the scientific and political landscape have changed—and influenced each other—over the past twenty years. “We went from having a president who loves science to a president who doesn’t trust it, and actively ignores and denies it. We’re in a world of full-scale denialism right now, and that’s not just distressing, it’s dangerous” (Sherman).

The lines cutting through and painting over the realities of women in science, how women in science are seen or treated and the influence of sexism on women scientists are illustrated through Gunderson’s characters and themes. “Inevitably there will be some line in a play of mine that is about how science itself is sexless, so why is there so much sexism in it?” (Sherman). All this led Gunderson, inexorably, to the story of Henrietta Swan Leavitt and her colleagues Williamina Fleming and Annie Jump Cannon.

Leavitt's obituary, cited by George Johnson in his book *Miss Leavitt's Stars: The Untold Story of the Woman Who Discovered How to Measure the Universe*, indicates Leavitt inherited "the stern virtues of her puritan ancestors," "took life seriously," "her sense of duty, justice and loyalty was strong." She was devoted to her family, unselfish in her friendships, loyal to her principles and—interestingly, considering where Gunderson places the character's beliefs—"sincere in her attachment to her religion and church" (Johnson 28).

She had the happy faculty of appreciating all that was worthy and lovable in others, and was possessed of a nature so full of sunshine that, to her, all of life became beautiful and full of meaning (Johnson 28).

Though indications of her life are faint—there are no personal diaries or ephemera to be gleaned—Johnson writes that Leavitt deserves a proper biography and bemoans that mention of her in books is generally relegated to footnotes and sidebars in science textbooks.

Leavitt was born July 4, 1868 and died December 12, 1921. As indicated in the play, she was the daughter of a Congregational church minister. While Gunderson's play paints Leavitt as essentially discounting or at least suffering little influence from her family's religious bearings, it seems from the obituarist's account that this isn't necessarily factual. However, as the obituary was not written by Leavitt, one perhaps cannot know her true religious leanings. What we can deduce is Gunderson's intent: she created the character of Margaret—a composer who worked as a church organist in her father's church—as a religious counterweight against the Henrietta character's faith in science above a faith in God. The conversation Gunderson institutes is not, at its heart, one of whether religion and science contradict each other or whether one is obviously correct, but rather that a "faith" in

either one may be a consideration of the same idea with a different approach. The characters concede that they are both “looking up,” and while this won’t solve the ongoing argument of whether there is a Deity or whether the Universe is all, it offers a polite shaking of hands in the context of the play.

Leavitt enrolled at Oberlin College in 1885, took a preparatory course and then undertook two years of undergraduate study. She entered Radcliffe—then the Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women—in 1888 (Johnson 26). She studied Latin, Greek, English, languages, history (in which she had been deficient but which she corrected by her junior year), fine arts and philosophy. Her only “C” grade was in German; she didn’t take many science courses but in her fourth year she enrolled in Astronomy, receiving an A-. Johnson notes that while at Radcliffe, Leavitt was only a short distance from Observatory Hill, supervised by Edward Pickering.

Pickering had been a noteworthy professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, establishing the first curriculum in the U.S. where students could confront the ideas of physics in laboratory experiments; he was hired in 1876 to supervise the Harvard College Observatory at the age of thirty (Johnson 15). Harvard had determined to precisely catalogue every star in the sky; Pickering, who had served on government expeditions to observe total eclipses, was struck by how little data had been gathered on star brightness and star color. He determined that his role in Astronomy would be “to amass mountains of data, about which others could theorize.”

In 1893, at the age of twenty-five, Leavitt arrived at Harvard College Observatory as a volunteer with the goal to learn astronomy (Johnson 25). She joined a small team of women “computers” who held degrees in science and worked in two small, quaintly-

decorated rooms hung with star charts, according to Marcia Bartusiak's book *The Day We Found The Universe*. They worked at mahogany tables with magnifying glasses, a notebook, and a series of photographic glass plates with sections of the sky negatively photographed on their surfaces (Bartusiak 92).

Each star was compared to the North Star which was set at magnitude 2.1—Johnson says this was somewhat of an arbitrary setting. The computers could observe, compare and record information about a star once per minute. Over time, the Harvard College Observatory measured and catalogued forty-five thousand stars (Johnson 16).

Bartusiak writes that the computers numbered each star on their given plates, determined a star's exact position and assigned it either a spectral class or photographic magnitude. These observations were recorded in a series of notebooks maintained by the computers. Annie Jump Cannon—the manager with the staunch work ethic in Gunderson's play—developed her classification system, eventually adopted internationally, during the course of her work as a computer in Pickering's attic computer room (Bartusiak 92). She quotes Cannon's attitude toward Pickering positively:

He treated [the computers] as equals in the astronomical world...and his attitude toward them was as full of courtesy as if he were meeting them at a social gathering...He was the gallant Victorian gentleman (Bartusiak 92).

While this account may not jibe with the devices of Gunderson's play, the argument for artistic license must be made. Gunderson's use of two completely fictional characters in the play indicates there is more a desire to present a historical truth even if playing somewhat loosely with historical fact. A key indication of this, even in Bartusiak's quote, can be found in Cannon calling him a "gallant Victorian gentleman." One can equate many thematic

qualities around the word “Victorian” which could lend to a magnified masculine and diminished feminine paradigm. Pickering’s own attitude toward an assistant and his invoking his housekeeper—Williamina Fleming—as able to do a better job illustrates this:

Frustrated one day by a male assistant’s ineptitude, Pickering had declared that his maid could do a better job, and he found out she could (Bartusiak 93).

In truth, Fleming was more than capable. Pickering’s “Victorian” image aside, he recognized that women were valuable employees apart from housework. He employed no less than forty women as computers on his team. Still, the sting of the Victorian masculinity pervading the culture of the time empoisoned contemporary reflections of his department—the women on his team were known as “Pickering’s Harem” (Bartusiak 93). Gunderson discovered and utilized this demeaning epithet in *Silent Sky*. Despite this sad attempt at Victorian humor, Fleming became curator of the photographic plate collection, eventually doubled her salary, and “was in charge of classifying stars according to their spectra, the colors revealed when their light was refracted through a prism” (Johnson 20). Her gratitude toward Pickering for the opportunity is evident in that she named her son—born the year Pickering hired her—Edward Pickering Fleming.

The computers—for the sake of *Silent Sky*, Henrietta, Annie and Williamina—worked for 25 cents an hour examining the plates and recording their observations. The work they did over the course of their time at Harvard has grown to become an invaluable archive of discovery.

Even as more “liberal” academics like Pickering and others were progressive in expanding women’s roles in the sciences, they were not so ahead of their time as to offer promotions for their important contributions. In her book *Women in Science*, Vivian Gornick

notes that Pickering's computers not only had "no chance for advancement, they rarely received a raise—at least at Harvard—even after years of devoted service" (Gornick 68). In the long run, Gornick wrote, these women were expected to make a career out of a job that men would have seen as "a stepping stone to more challenging and prestigious roles."

Leavitt's work with the Magellanic Clouds—two irregular dwarf galaxies—proved most exciting. At the time, it was not known what they were. But working with the photographic glass in her workroom, Leavitt found a certain pattern—a discovery—that led to measuring distances beyond the galaxy and mapping the universe (Johnson 11).

It was in these Magellanic Clouds that, in 1908, Leavitt discovered that certain bright Cepheid variables—stars that pulsate radially, varying in temperature and diameter and changing in brightness with a certain amplitude—took longer to complete their brightness cycles (Murdin 211). She didn't know that the Clouds were galaxies; she reasoned that the Cepheids in each Cloud were the same distance from Earth whose brightnesses must relate to the period over which they changed their light output. This discovery was called the period-luminosity relation and demonstrated that Cepheids are "standard candles" that can be used to measure distances by comparing brightness. This became a fundamental discovery used by scientists after Leavitt's death to determine the size of the Universe or discover exact locations of objects in the Universe.

Using the period-luminosity relationship, any star in the Magellanic Clouds with the same period would have the same absolute magnitude, and the fainter apparent magnitude would be the result of greater distance. The Cepheids were the clue... (Levy 33).

At the time, Leavitt knew she had something in her discovery but she didn't want to overinterpret the data. At one point she singled out sixteen stars and arranged them in a list of their periods and magnitudes. "It's worthy of notice the brighter variables have the longer periods" (Johnson 38).

In the simplest terms possible, a star's true brightness could be determined from the rhythm of its beat—this is the heart of the musical discovery Henrietta makes in *Silent Sky* when she exclaims "The stars are music!" while Margaret plunks out a strange chromatic series of intervals on the piano. Even withstanding that Leavitt had no pianist sister Margaret, it is a poetic notion mirroring that notion she may have had when she discovered the rhythm in these Cepheid variables.

Later scientists would use Leavitt's discovery in conjunction with parallax to calculate distances to stellar objects. Paul Murdin defines "parallax" as "the apparent shift of something due to the motion of the observer:

Hold your finger up at arm's length, and keep it still, but move your head from side to side. The finger moves against the background. The angle by which it moves is its parallax (Murdin 185).

Parallax is key to calculating triangulation—the most fundamental and reliable technique for measuring the wider Universe. As the Earth changes position during its movement through space, the background also changes. Using the Earth's orbit as a base line with the parallax angle, a star's distance can be determined if the Earth-Sun distance is known (Kitchin 321).

Getting back to Leavitt, her work—and that of others too—was far from done. At least now, astronomers had hope of shaping and sizing the galaxy and objects outside of it.

Johnson notes that Leavitt herself was not able to pursue the matter as Pickering kept her working with the star plates and other projects. He was an accumulator of facts who wanted to provide material for others to unravel and, as such a man, did not encourage theorizing (Johnson 55). She did receive praise and correspondence from fellow astronomers worldwide, though these correspondences were directed toward Pickering—the man in charge—and it’s uncertain how much direct correspondence Leavitt enjoyed.

“What a variable-star ‘fiend’ Miss Leavitt is,” one letter from an astronomer at Princeton reads. “One can’t keep up with the roll of new discoveries” (Johnson 37). A *Washington Post* article (Leavitt was evidently known to media for her discoveries) indicates Leavitt “discovered twenty-five new variable stars. Her record almost equals Frohman’s.” This is an allusion to Charles Frohman, the famous theatrical producer and agent—an interesting anecdote that Gunderson, perhaps, smiled at as she did her own research.

As men like Edwin Hubble and Ejnar Hertzsprung began using Leavitt’s observations in ways that would open the secrets of the cosmos to humanity, she began to fall ill. She suffered from stomach cancer and passed away at the age of fifty-three on December 12, 1921. In her time at Harvard College Observatory, Leavitt discovered 2,400 variable stars—roughly half the number known to then exist. Four years after her death, a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences inquired about her discoveries—his intent was to nominate her for a Nobel Prize in Physics. He did not know Leavitt had died—a Nobel Prize cannot be awarded to the dead (Bartusiak 99).

Vivian Gornick’s *Women in Science* indicates that Leavitt’s situation—being relegated to an attic to become a permanent sort of research associate—is still the situation of many female scientists. “...they’ve been ‘allowed’ into science for a hundred years now,” Gornick

writes, “but for the most part under severely circumscribed conditions, doing segregated work known as ‘women’s work’” (Gornick 69). Attitudes had scarcely changed by the middle of the 20th century—Gornick notes that chemistry department heads in 1960 simply said “we don’t hire women.” In a particularly disheartening story from one university woman, Gornick wrote that “the chemistry department here doesn’t advertise. It’s illegal now, but they still do it that way.” In the selfsame account, the woman talking to Gornick alleged that the men of the department would write to their friends—men who had only male graduate students. Sometimes, they would bring young women for interviews.

“It’s always the same,” the woman told Gornick. “They look at these excellent young women and they say, ‘she’s very good but she lacks seasoning’...of the young men just like her, they say, ‘we’d better grab him before someone else does’” (Gornick 88).

Perhaps generations have changed this. There are still disparities that must be considered: the Faculty of Science at MIT, in 2006, contained 36 women and 240 men; the percentage of women in science or engineering faculties hovered at about 13 percent in 2006 (Gornick 102).

Gornick argues that feminism and science share vital characteristics. She notes both are filled with “urgency and conviction, both are observing intently, both are concentrated on demystifying the self and the environment, recovering the truths of the life within,” adding that feminist scientists capture “the pain and excitement of a culture struggling to mature” (Gornick 146).

According to Magdolna Hargittai in her book, *Women Scientists: Reflections, Challenges, and Breaking Boundaries*, the glass ceiling is shaking. “Women have served as university deans, chancellors, or presidents...and been in charge of science academies and large research

institutions” (Hargittai 314). This isn’t enough, obviously, but Hargittai notes that change comes slowly.

In fact, change comes with resistance. As recently as 2010, she writes, a joint work by Irène Curie and Frédéric Joliot was quoted as carried out by “Joliet and Curie.” “Not even the alphabetical order required placing Joliot before Curie” (Hargittai 315). While this does not necessarily mean there was a sexist intent behind the juxtaposition of the names, the placement of the male’s name—while second alphabetically—before the female’s name affords a reader opportunity to suspect a perceived masculine authority:

Discrimination concerning women in science still exists, even though its level has diminished and it is often manifested in more subtle ways than before. Considering that women make up half the population, there are still conspicuously few women scientists, especially in the higher strata of academia (Hargittai 316).

Change continues to happen.

Women like Leavitt, like Gunderson, leave their marks. Leavitt changed our understanding of Astronomy and totally unseated our ideas of how large the cosmos is. The work of the giants in her field has been based so much on the foundational research Leavitt and other women have provided. Gunderson—who has never had a play on Broadway though she’s topped the rankings of produced playwrights—strives to showcase women like Leavitt. One would think Leavitt and Gunderson could share an interesting conversation on how much has changed in a hundred years. Maybe less than either would hope; maybe more than would be expected.

Doubtlessly, both would agree there is work to be done. Doubtlessly, both would continue with their work. Doubtlessly, Henrietta Leavitt and Lauren Gunderson deserve

respect and appreciation for endeavoring to persevere—perhaps for the mere sake of perseverance; perhaps, though, for goals greater and more far-reaching than either could imagine. May that work be measured, as Henrietta would say, in light.

CHAPTER 3

DIRECTOR'S JOURNAL: WONDER WILL ALWAYS GET US THERE

04/15/2020

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and the closure of Minnesota State University, Mankato's campus, the production team of *Silent Sky* met via Zoom at 8 a.m. for our first production meeting and concepts.

Our team includes Production Stage Manager Sam Verdick, Assistant Stage Manager Reina Beisell, Scenic Designer Grace Ricard, Lighting Designer Ryan Hedman, Sound Designer Frank Vondra, Costume Designer Ethan Hayes, Technical Director Philomena Schnoebelen and Faculty Advisors Matthew Caron and Steven Smith. All were present except for stage management.

I explained the configuration and concepts. We will be staging the show in a deep thrust configuration in the Andreas Theatre in the Earley Center for Performing Arts. The play takes place from 1900 to 1920 and will be presented in a transcendental but realistic style. I expressed that I want to present the human spirit transcending struggle and oppression through what might be considered "mystic science." By this, I mean presenting a transcendental spin on the discoveries Henrietta is making through her work, the oppression she feels in the male-dominated field of early twentieth-century astronomy and her physical disabilities. Dreamlike sequences present this mystical atmosphere against the realism of Henrietta's everyday life and struggle. A mystical spatial and temporal transcendence occurs as characters move from one place and time to another during a few

lines or, sometimes, in the course of one line. This implies that time and space are shaped to the telling of the story in a mystic, transcendent way. A critical aspect of the play, which addresses long-standing and contemporary issues, is women's achievement being usurped by men but being reclaimed by women.

I expressed conceptual ideas including how all matter and energy have been present since the creation of the universe, that we are all stardust, that nothing in the universe is insignificant, that we all will return to the stars. These elements are mirrored in key moments of the play: in one of Henrietta's dream sequences, Peter refers to the stars above when asking if she has tucked the children in for the night; Annie tells Henrietta she prefers to measure her colleague in light; the dreamy transformation of each of the characters into stars in the final death montage.

A description of each character followed. Hearing no dissent from the team or advisors, I believe the concept meeting was well met and provided the designers with opportunity to flex their imaginative and creative muscles.

The next meeting will be April 22, again via Zoom.

04/22/2020

I recently learned that Braxton Fiskin will be serving as Production Stage Manager in place of Sam Verdick. Fortunately, we're early enough in the process that this personnel change will not negatively impact the production.

Advisor Smith will provide photos to consider for projections at the next meeting.

Scenic Designer Ricard is planning a constellation pattern for the stage floor with a vintage style. She plans to use the piano from the production of *A Doll House*. We

determined that the characters' attic workspace need not be a full representation of the space, but rather an emulation. Similarly, the ocean liner scenes should emulate the night sky and reflective water, not a steamship. The overall scenic design "key" is simplicity.

Lighting Designer Hedman is considering how to present stars with lighting instruments and will do more research. The use of purple and blue hues seems to jibe with everyone. He is working on gobo possibilities to present a watery surface on the floor—Advisor Smith noted that the goal was to present the scene as on the water, not underwater.

Costume Designer Hayes is considering options with gendered colors from the early 1900s. His concept is based on women fitting into a masculine world.

Sound Designer Vondra is experimenting with instrumentation and scoring. It is exciting that he is planning to write original compositions for the play. He also did this for my major project, *Going to See the Elephant*, which sadly was cancelled by the COVID-19 pandemic. I expect his growth will be evident as he has previously scored a show.

It seems, happily, that *Silent Sky* is under way. The transcendent me is floating amid cosmic wonders. Cynical and grounded me—afraid of pandemics and roadblocks and personal stumblings. There is no benefit to worrying about it. I suppose we should do what we can to live as we can as well as we can. Art is a part of that. We are a part of that.

04/29/2020

Today's Zoom production meeting was focused on moving our team into the summer months. We will have one more meeting May 6 to close out Spring 2020. Scenic Designer Ricard was absent.

I informed the team that I contacted the playwright. I conversed—briefly—with Lauren Gunderson via Facebook; she expressed some elements about the pace of the show and some character aspects. Though a brief conversation, these aspects will be important to implement in rehearsals.

Budget estimates are due at the next meeting. Technical Director Schnoebelen will make a budget based on Ricard's design once she has the ground plan.

Lighting Designer Hedman is designing a rotating nebula effect. We are considering at least four and maybe five acting areas. There will be isolation spots used for direct addresses or showing the characters in a place away from where the main action is happening.

Costume Designer Hayes said most of his design can be pulled from stock. This is helpful, particularly to our small budget.

Sound Designer Vondra provided a shared file with some examples of his compositions. I am anxious to have a listen.

Little else was discussed—the end of the semester is upon us; summer is in the minds of everyone. I'm anxious to see designs and to proceed—my own tendency to procrastinate is not remedied by the relished arrival of summer. Hopefully, we all can continue working while enjoying what we can of summer as the pandemic goes on.

06/17/2020

We met via Zoom at 9 a.m. PSM Fiskin and ASM Beisell were absent. I informed the team that the expectation is that the show will go on as scheduled and appreciated the work all are doing over the summer months. Advisor Caron echoed the plan for the season

to go on barring further catastrophes like COVID-19. He mentioned that if there is a need to cancel on-campus activities in the fall, thesis shows would be presented in Spring 2021.

Lighting Designer Hedman asked about the finale with actors becoming stars as they die. With my limited design vocabulary and understanding of possibilities and limitations, I asked that he and Scenic Designer Ricard spearhead this in concert with their advisors' suggestions. This isn't meant to duck responsibility—I simply don't have the understanding of our technical capabilities in the studio and don't want to dictate something that may be either inadequate or impossible.

Costume Designer Hayes noted that digital renderings would be available soon.

Ricard asked for a list of projections and their placement in the script. She has drafted the scenic design and plans to share it soon. She will be going to Colorado for work and will have limited internet access from June 23 through August 9 but will provide a telephone number we can use in case an emergency design issue arises. Hedman added that he will proceed further with his design once Ricard's drafting is available to him.

Sound Designer Vondra has completed his sound design and will forward it to me. I would like to be able to suggest edits and Vondra said he expects edits and can make them—he has not programmed anything yet. He'll share this with the team.

08/19/2020

Our final summer production meeting was held this morning—auditions are five days away. Most production elements, including building the set, are ready to proceed.

Beisell has taken over as Production Stage Manager. I met with her to discuss the production outside of Caribou Coffee—she is interested, ambitious and excited. A new Assistant Stage Manager will be found soon.

We met via Zoom with all in attendance except Scenic Designer Ricard, who has informed me that she has issues with internet connectivity and other technical troubles.

Tablework and a readthrough are scheduled for next Tuesday, 08/25/2020, as the show will be cast Monday after auditions. As per university and department guidelines, actors will need to wear masks and practice social distancing even in rehearsals and performance. This obviously impacts my blocking and I will need to augment instances of intimacy and physical contact. At Advisor Caron's suggestion, I have reached out to Director of Dance Daniel Stark to assist with this. The thought was that Stark, being an expert on telling stories through movement, may be able to offer solutions for contactless intimacy and storytelling. We have met a few times, and I'm happy that Stark has entertained my questions while offering simple but beautiful solutions. We will meet again before rehearsals begin.

While Ricard was not present, I informed the designers that we will need to make some alterations to how certain scenes are set up. As an example, the office scenes—previously constrained to the platform, which will no longer accommodate four actors—will be altered to extend beyond the lip of the platform and onto the deck of the stage. This ensures that no more than three actors, safely distanced, are present on the platform. We may need even less furniture than previously thought. If movement possibilities in the face of social distancing requirements allow, the telling of the story could become even more transcendental than initially thought.

Advisor Smith indicated that rehearsals could be split to prevent too much concentration of people. This came because of my rehearsal schedule not including a detailed breakdown of my daily rehearsal agenda. I explained that I always try to break my rehearsals into chunks so that once an actor is no longer necessary, he or she may be released. Rehearsals will begin with the full cast (or the largest number of actors called) and work through dismissals until we are down to the last two actors—mostly Henrietta and Margaret or Henrietta and Peter.

I invited all designers to sit in on rehearsals whenever they would like provided they schedule their visits through PSM Beisell to ensure safe distancing.

Sound Designer Vondra's score is in the second or final draft and he plans to begin programming soon. He will send me a list of preshow music for consideration. I asked him to consider augmenting a few areas of the score, specifically the music that represents Margaret's random piano playing—as it is now, the music is a very isolated three-note interval that repeats somnambulantly. The final synthesizer chord in the show sounds too much like a 1980s VHS introduction soundbite. The question of using mics came up; Advisor Caron noted that muffling caused by masks is a valid concern but with good actor coaching, actors will concentrate on diction and articulation. We will need to let Advisor Smith know as soon as possible if we determine mics are needed as this will require more people in the booth, which could affect technology and safe distancing.

Lighting Designer Hedman's plot should be ready for rehearsals. He asked again how actors will be turned into stars for the final scene; I indicated that in conversations with Stark, the idea of using a star gobo with the actors physically “orbiting” inside that pattern

could suggest they have become stellar objects. The use of color and intensity—which would be totally Hedman’s expert decision—could add to this.

Costume Designer Hayes will be speaking with Faculty Costume Designer David McCarl to discuss existing mask options.

I ended by requesting the designers remain flexible while implementing designs.

08/24/2020

Auditions for *Silent Sky*, *The Tempest*, and *Hair* were held this afternoon at 4:30 p.m. *Silent Sky* and *The Tempest* auditioned in the Andreas Theatre and *Hair* auditioned in the Ted Paul Theatre. More than 60 students auditioned for the three shows, with several choosing to audition through video due to concerns over COVID-19.

It was a pleasure to watch some of the actors with whom I have worked and learned over the last two years. Several of them, in my notebook, were marked with comments such as “a new maturity since last Spring” or “much more versatile and dynamic than before.”

Lindsey Oetken was cast as Henrietta Leavitt. She exhibited great physicality and a range of vocal dynamics in her auditions (she also auditioned for *The Tempest*). There was a nice shift between the auditions physically and vocally, and she has a depth and maturity to her that lends to the role. I noted she would be a good fit for Henrietta, Margaret or Annie. Ultimately, she was the best choice for Henrietta.

Via Logan was cast as Margaret Leavitt. I have watched this young woman grow as an actor over the last two years and her ability is a testament to the work she has done. Her physical and vocal dynamics, like Oetken’s, made her an easy actress to cast. My notes indicated she would be a nice hidden gem as Henrietta but might fit better elsewhere; also,

her presentation was one of the few undergraduate auditions that indicated a true understanding of what she was saying and was not just a rote recitation.

Ty Hudson was cast as Peter Shaw. I have been impressed with Hudson since I first saw him perform in Acting Techniques during our first year at Minnesota State Mankato. I consider it a challenge to direct him and that is a part of why I chose him but again, like Oetken, there is a depth and maturity (but also a lovely boyishness) in Hudson that other candidates for the role did not exhibit. My final note on him during his audition: push for Hudson but be sure to cast a Henrietta that can go toe-to-toe with him.

Grace Ricard was cast as Williamina Fleming. Her delivery was sophisticated and appropriate, with physical characterizations to match a polished vocal delivery. Having worked with Grace in the past, I was a bit more comfortable casting her even though she is also working as our scenic designer. I am comfortable in the fact that she can do both. I also know of her abilities with dialects and, as Williamina is Scottish, I needed someone versed in dialect work.

Morgan Benson was cast as Annie Jump Cannon. Again, I have worked with Morgan in the past. I have a feel for her approach to a role and have seen her true abilities. Her audition provided very subtle shifts in expression with the most physical and vocal variety I think I've seen from her. I believe the pairing of her with Ricard in the roles of the two senior scientists offers promise.

I felt I needed to be assertive with my needs going into the casting meeting with Directors David Loudermilk and Matthew Caron. Music Director Nicholas Wayne also attended with Loudermilk. I was not expecting the attendance of faculty members Heather Hamilton and David McCarl but their presence was helpful.

When I offered the group my chosen cast, McCarl mentioned my choice contained three graduate students and that graduate students have not been able to receive project credit in the studio. I retorted that, this being my thesis, I need the strongest cast I could get and I expected casting to be a negotiation. Hamilton noted that with current needs, the project credit of studio shows was being reconsidered. I appreciated this. I also appreciated the understanding of Loudermilk and Caron as my colleagues in this casting process, and they negotiated with fair consideration of all three productions. Loudermilk has been my friend and companion; Caron, my mentor and advisor.

We now prepare for rehearsals—a few short weeks of intense work before the play is on its feet. I don't feel adrenalized, but calmed. This is interesting and slightly uneasy, but nice. Nice. I'm happy right now and I hope my fellows are as well.

08/25/2020

Tonight we did table work and a readthrough of the script. My table work style—a more lyric train of thought explaining my concepts and ideas—seems to work for some and not for others. Sometimes it is important to step back and determine that the simplest explanation is probably the best. At least one actor, however, commented on my explanations being poetic. This makes me happy.

Our readthrough proceeded with occasional pauses to explain pronunciations of certain words. Many of them, including *nebulae*, *novae* and *Magellanic* I have previously verified in the *Kenyon and Knott Pronouncing Dictionary*. The history of the characters as outlined in the tablework did come through in the reading to a degree. I don't think the actors' retention of the material will be difficult as we put the show on its feet, as the

characters' histories are rich and interesting. Ty Hudson and Via Logan have a different game to play, as their characters are non-historical creations of the playwright.

PSM Beisell did an excellent job taking notes. She's doing a fine job, this being the first time she's served as PSM. Support for her is important. There is a wonder to working with people young in their craft, finding their skills, determining a proper path. I hope I'm offering a positive experience for her.

08/26/2020

Our production meeting this morning began with two irritating absences. I do my very best to stay level-headed and understanding—I pride myself on being polite. We have three weeks to shape this production for an audience. I can't have designers absent. I believe the team understands.

I addressed a couple scheduling issues for Labor Day weekend as well as the Saturday before show week. I'd like to give the cast two days off over Labor Day weekend and I'm keeping Saturday, Sept. 12, as a "To Be Announced" day in case the designers or technical personnel need the rehearsal time—and it's only fair that they get the time they need. Without that day off for the cast, it will amount to three full weeks of either rehearsals, shows, classes or a combination of all three with no break.

I told the team that Professor Stark would be joining the rehearsal this evening to better formulate our plan for movement. Since Advisor Caron mentioned approaching Stark, it has been a sliver in my mind how our department has stayed (unintentionally) divided. I'm embarrassed that I had not considered reaching out to our dance colleagues until Caron mentioned it. I'm happy that Stark and I have an artistic collaboration in the

face of this pandemic we're fighting. I can hope that such collaborations do not end with *Silent Sky*. I think both sides of the department can benefit from the participation of the other—even guys like me with two left feet and no physical grace.

We discussed the issue of masks. Masks and the necessary social distancing in performance are sadly unavoidable. Costume Designer Hayes has been working out ideas with his advisor, David McCarl, to ensure masks will serve as a protectant as well as a costume piece. I indicated we could also consider the use of practical—not protective—gloves in all of the costume designs in effort to assuage any concerns for physical contact which does need to happen. Hayes agreed to investigate this. Importantly, Advisor Caron mentioned that the Spanish Flu was prevalent in the latter portion of this play's time. Society dealt with the same issues we are today—masks, and the vigorous debate over whether masks did any good—including the defiant attitude that the government cannot force the wearing of masks. The more things change...

Sound Designer Vondra had quickly augmented his score to accommodate some areas which concerned me. He also corrected some instrumentation in his finale. No more 1980s VHS introductions.

Tonight we met to block the show. I introduced Stark to the cast and stage management. He indicated he was interested in helping after I reached out to him—at first, he thought he would hand this off to a dance student. The more he thought of it after reading the script, the more he appreciated it and decided to undertake the project himself. I can't say enough how much I appreciate this assistance. I feel I've made a productive connection to a mentor in the dance division of our department.

We welcomed Emma Anderson as our Assistant Stage Manager.

I took the PSM and ASM by surprise when I instructed them to note the blocking as I dictated. This was a surprise to both; I assumed they understood blocking involved stage management documentation. When rehearsal was over, Beisell—with Anderson at her side—indicated this was a bit unnerving. It didn't occur to me that neither of them understood this role in the process. I apologized and asked if they needed any assistance going over any of the blocking, which they didn't—together, they felt they had gotten everything. We can't assume our teams know everything. I will not forget this.

It was my intention to have the full show blocked tonight, but time got away from us. Admittedly, some of the passages we blocked were those which I either wanted to watch actors play through or which I intended to block with Stark's assistance. I don't know if leaving those out tonight would have been the correct choice but including them certainly ruled out the possibility of getting into Act 2. I'll take a more methodical approach tomorrow. I must remember they haven't been reading the play over and over for nine months now.

Morgan Benson approached me about a line that conflicts with the character's later attitudes. I reminded her the play takes place over twenty years and the character's attitude would evolve. She agreed; I told her we could look at it more closely if necessary. I appreciate that an actor is thinking about such things so early in the process.

08/27/2020

We blocked Act 2 tonight. I hoped to have the show blocked last night so I'm a day behind schedule. I intend to make up ground in the next three rehearsals. I didn't have input from Stark on the final scene tonight; I told the actors to anticipate changes.

Costume Designer Hayes showed and explained to the cast his costume designs. Scenic Designer Ricard asked about projections after rehearsal; she has lots of images to use. She was concerned about timing a digital video; I expressed that I thought it would be best to have something that can go for a while with an operator controlling the cues and she agreed.

I'm excited for tomorrow—to get past the table work and the blocking and start working the meat-and-potatoes of the show. Onward.

08/28/2020

I began the rehearsal explaining that I have gone over all the transcendental, stylized ideas of the show and now it is time to put the human elements in place. A degree of good humor in the cast's reaction was appreciated—I do wonder, pleasantly, if thus far they didn't think they were working with something of a madman.

I broke our rehearsals into more digestible chunks to focus on specific areas and to get cast members through rehearsal and out the doors as soon as possible. Ricard and Benson were the first two to be released and, while they are showing progress, it is also the first night of really working the scenes. Working with Logan, Hudson and Oetken was as much a clinic for me—enjoyably so—as anything. It's stunning how impressive Logan is as an actor. In French scene 2.6, I asked her to consider what Henrietta says to Margaret in the letter and why Margaret doesn't recite portions of it aloud. It was evident she immediately began processing that, formulating answers, determining what it meant to her approach to the scene.

Another key scene that showed immense progress is French scene 2.1—the dream sequence on the ocean liner with Henrietta and Peter. The blocking I gave them was, in line with Professor Stark’s notes and suggestions, based on the rotation and revolution of a binary star system. We worked through it a time or two and Oetken admitted she needed more guidance on what is motivating the movement. I explained that the scene was a dream and sought to imply a stylized stellar pattern, but simply put, it is a courtship dance in a dream sequence. I added that it was appropriate to add rotation to the movement as well as revolution. This spinning and circling makes the motion waltzlike, and this aided both Oetken and Hudson. From there, we ran the scene about a half dozen times with definite improvement and forward drive in the actors each time. Simply beautiful.

The highlight for tonight, for me, was working with Oetken and Hudson. The joys and pitfalls of working with highly skilled actors are quite pleasant. I told them I didn’t intend to be flippant with them by responding to a scene with a comment such as “that’s so nice” but at this point—only our first real working rehearsal—that’s where I am. I indicated we could go deeper and they both agreed it would be easier to do so once the book is out of their hands. This is nice to hear. Similarly, it is lovely to see Logan absorbing every tiny note I offer, applying her own processes to the role with the merest suggestion offered. My past work with Ricard and Benson has benefitted me tremendously; I appreciate the eagerness of Ricard and the somewhat cerebral process of Benson—I think I tend to work similarly as an actor.

Production Stage Manager Beisell asked if I could show her a specific scene in my director’s book to confirm the blocking. She then asked how I determine the blocking and how to write it out, which led to a brief discussion on picturization and composition, as well

as the abbreviations and symbols I use in my script. She's so eager to learn; she seemed somewhat hesitant at the start of this project but her comfortability with me is growing and she's asking important questions. I appreciate her curiosity and willingness to engage while she learns the business of stage management.

Finally, to be honest, I feel much more engaged with this show after tonight—the passing from the conceptual soup of ideas and into the meat-and-potatoes of crafting a human story. After tonight, I feel I will be much more upset if the pandemic shuts this show down as it did my major project from last spring.

08/30/2020

Via Logan was unexpectedly absent with a work issue. She had reached out to PSM Beisell when it was clear there would be a problem and we were able to get through the rehearsal without her. She has assured me that this would be the only time it happens.

The cast was mostly off book for the rehearsal tonight. Oetken was not able to spend as much time with the script this weekend as she would have liked and worked with script in hand. Hudson, Ricard and Benson had a fairly firm grasp on the work with only a few stumbles and corrections. I was impressed considering it's been just under a week since auditions were held. Ricard's Scottish dialect substitutions are flawless.

A few incidents with blocking needed adjustment. Some furniture placement is cumbersome but I need to see it in use before I can make a determination; with a cast member absent tonight, I was not able to work the scenes in which that furniture is used.

Characters are emerging. I'm pleased with the caliber of the actors and I'm not surprised that such positive progress is being made. Tomorrow we hit Act 2 again with a

deeper dive into the characters. I wait anxiously for Professor Stark to sit in on Wednesday's rehearsal—I'm curious what he'll think of what I've done and what he'll work to enhance.

08/31/2020

We're getting closer to having a set. Our furniture is selected and mostly positioned—we still need to get the piano and bench. The cyclorama and black drapes are hung on the upstage wall. I'm told the semicircular upstage platform needs legs and is nearly ready to be assembled.

As I watched the scenes unfold tonight, I was a bit occupied with concern for props, costumes, lighting and sound elements. I think this is because, though Oetken still needs to get out of the script, my cast is so far beyond where I expected them to be at this point. Only a week ago were we posting the cast list. Four of my actors are off book and carving out some specific character choices. There are nice things happening with them and I can't escape a tinge of concern for the comfort they are allowing me to feel. It makes me wonder what I'm missing. I do have two weeks to determine what it is and where it belongs. The knowing that the thing exists is maddening. Perhaps I'm too worrisome.

We ran Act 2 then broke into groupings of scenes. I had more notes but as we released actors and worked on one-on-one scenes, fewer notes and suggestions emerged—usually, this is the opposite. This doesn't alleviate the foreboding threat that I'm missing some obvious but camouflaged problem.

I'm going to go over my notes. There must be an answer somewhere. Perhaps it will reveal itself when Professor Stark joins us on Wednesday. Never undervalue a second set of eyes.

09/01/2020

We did a “stop-go” rehearsal of Act 1 tonight and enjoyed the company of the design team. A decent rehearsal that I felt was a good sample for the designers to see. I still have one person on book and the rest of the cast is off book but paraphrasing lines.

Regrettably, I mentioned last night that we should eliminate the chair and end table during Act 1. Tonight I discovered that was a mistake and we reintroduced it.

Scenic Designer Ricard introduced many of the props to be used. She showed me a sample of the photographic star plates. She’s busy as an actress and scenic designer.

It’s definitely time to tie tempos and pacing to the delivery, but I can’t get too deeply invested in that until the lines are solidified. I have actors exhibiting multiple levels of mastery of the script; some are being slowed down and others are being forced. We need cohesion; having the script committed to memory is the first step in fostering that synergy. I shouldn’t have to be noting this.

I’ll give them until tomorrow night before a more serious discussion happens. Also tomorrow night, Professor Stark will attend. I’m looking forward to working on some scenes with him.

09/02/2020

Professor Stark joined us for the evening and we troubleshooted Act 1. It was refreshing to welcome him. Perspective from another set of trained eyes is a necessity for a director in my opinion and this is the first time I have sought the assistance of someone with a dance and movement background. Fool that I am, I should have been doing this since my first-year minor project but haven’t.

We worked through scenes and I gave some notes. Then Stark talked with the cast about various topics, such as finishing school and if they knew how finishing school would have “finished” preparing young women in that time. He explained with aplomb how Scenic Designer Ricard’s arrangement of the women’s stations on the stage and my placement of each character categorized them and made them fit amidst each other. Posture and attitude were more accurate to each character with just a bit of work from Stark. He explained to Hudson how his habitual confidence was coming through too much in the uncertain character of Peter. Being the actor he is, Hudson corrected—immediately, effortlessly—those elements. I really envy him his ability.

I asked Stark if he would like to work on a very tiny but extremely important scene involving movement. He indicated he was more interested in seeing what I had done and then commenting or offering his notes. Admittedly, this disappointed me a bit as I have delayed working this portion until I had Stark at a rehearsal. I didn’t feel my abilities with movement were adequate to the task. Not wanting to put Stark on the spot because of my own misunderstanding, I moved on as we have been doing in rehearsal, but I returned to it after rehearsal.

To show Stark what I have done with movement, I asked the cast to show us the first scene in Act 2. This is Henrietta’s fantasy on the ocean liner—a dreamscape where she enjoys a romantic life with Peter on the ocean with the vast night sky blanketing them. I am pleased with—if not proud of—what I have done with that. Stark seemed to agree that the movement works. He noted the differences the characters would possess in this fantasy world against their realities, pointing out specific physical elements.

Before we moved on, Stark asked what we had done in the final scene of the show so we worked the final scene. Stark questioned the choice of having each of the characters around Henrietta peel off the reality-based scene into the fantastical final scene. He also questioned some positioning and movement in the final scene, particularly Henrietta's walking away from the "orbit" and moving upstage, the characters facing out to the audience instead of in at Henrietta and timing and movement in the final orbit sequence. Key corrections include the cast moving to the observatory in a group, Henrietta emerging from the group to offer her final explanation of what happens, Henrietta rejoining the group, and finally beginning the death/orbit sequence at the end of the characters' lives with a comet-like orbit around Henrietta before being blasted off into space. I believe we both are satisfied with the ending scene.

Stark thanked the cast for its attention and we thanked him before he left. I went back and worked a scene with the full cast to ensure Stark's suggestions were still present in their minds as we had worked and changed so many things. Thankfully they adapted and moved forward with his notes evident in their presentations. I then released the cast aside from Oetken and Hudson. I had held off on doing the fantasy sequence between Peter announcing his love for Henrietta and the telegram from Margaret marking their father's stroke in hopes that I might get more guidance and, honestly, some blocking suggestions from Stark. With Oetken's and Hudson's input, I proceeded to block out an orbit-based movement sequence that tells the story of their budding romance on a fantasy ocean liner under the canopy of night sky. I believe it is good.

In the theatre, we tend to think of this need being filled by another director and that's valid. Consider that, given the demands of COVID-19, we're damn lucky to be able to

produce any kind of a show. I needed the assistance and expertise of someone who tells a story through movement and who can do so without physical contact and with social distancing. Even were this not the case for *Silent Sky*, it is no doubt a benefit to our production to welcome someone like Stark to provide insight and guidance.

Perhaps this illustrates my own shortcomings as a director, but I would be remiss in not challenging directors to welcome experts from multiple fields to provide expert guidance. We are so full of ourselves but we are not so wise. It is embarrassing that it has taken the staging of a thesis show during a pandemic to push me to reach out—and even then only at my advisor’s suggestions—to theatre’s sister discipline and the wonderful mentorship Stark has provided me.

The piano we thought we were using for this show was struck following last season’s production of *A Doll House*. I have informed Ricard that I will provide assistance in finding one or making a new one.

09/03/2020

We secured a piano today after no small amount of conversation—even some covert conversation between Advisor Smith and me. We pulled the faux baby grand piano from prop storage. I admit that it takes up a monstrous footprint compared to our needs and, for how obtusely tall it is, I think we may as well have built a faux upright piano to take up less horizontal space. It is mounted on wheels; I’ve instructed PSM Beisell to ask Tech Director Schnoebelen to lower the height of this monstrosity. Now, no one in the lowest row of the left bank of seats positioned downstage will be able to see much of anything if it isn’t lowered.

Rehearsal was fine aside from the continued use of a script by Oetken. We ran Act 2 twice and worked on implementing the damnably Cyclopean piano into the blocking as well as some character work. It is difficult to concentrate on the subtler aspects of character detail when an actor is still on book and being so distracted by a ridiculously huge set piece. Frustrated on both accounts, I called rehearsal at 8:40 p.m. with the express instruction that line work is the focus of the remainder of the night.

We were joined again by Sound Designer Vondra and Light Designer Hedman. Hedman asked if we could accept him setting his cues in rehearsal next Wednesday, Sept. 9. Vondra indicated he would also benefit from this. It will be good to time some technical aspects against performance aspects before we really get into the blood and guts of tech rehearsals.

Dance Director Stark will return tomorrow night. I was contacted by Director of Public Relations Corrie Eggimann today about the program and we discussed a title to attribute to Stark. As he is consulting with me on telling the story through movement, we determined he is our Movement Consultant. Whatever his title, he's a valued mentor and appreciated artist.

I've shared with several of my peers, mentors and fellows how I am nervously comfortable with where the show is. I'm nervous because I know we've only been at work on it for about a week, really, as far as digging into scenes and characters. We have a week before our tech rehearsals start. I still have one actor on book and we could have used the last several days to focus on characters, relationships, movement, tempos and more. I need a cast who is out of the script and living it on the stage. A good sign is that I am nervous about how comfortable I am. I'm not pleased about this.

09/04/2020

A day later and I feel better than last night—which means I’m no longer comfortable with where things are. Fascinating. I think of that great line from Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*: “You have disappointed me most pleasantly, Swiss Cheese.” I enjoy Swiss and pastrami—rye bread, please.

There were a lot of lines called and areas where Oetken had to pick up the script, but it was an immense improvement over last night. I’ve never handily directed actors unless the lines were in their mind and not on a page.

Movement Consultant Stark joined us tonight and we showed him the fantasy dance from Act 1, which he polished at the start of rehearsal. We proceeded to run Act 2 with more polishing.

We ended rehearsal at 9 p.m. to begin a refreshing holiday weekend before we begin a non-stop charge through the rest of this run beginning Monday.

09/07/2020

We enjoyed a mostly positive rehearsal during which I was able to focus more on subtleties of characters and less on the mechanics of the play. Oetken was still not completely off book. I’m not able to get her to certain crevasses and summits if she’s tied to her script. I told her I must insist she not use her script tomorrow night.

09/08/2020

Director of Public Relations Eggimann attended to take publicity photos. Oetken and Hudson were in full costume. I can’t wait to see the full cast dressed for this show. The

cast is working in costume shoes and rehearsal masks supplied by Costume Designer Hayes. Most props are in use, including the star spankers and the photographic star plates; only a few items remain for Scenic Designer Ricard to finalize.

The actors dived deep into their characters compared to last night. Unfortunately, Oetken didn't make it all the way through Act 1 without resorting to her script; Act 2 seems to be fine for her. I must respond more intently to this situation than I have; I also know how difficult memorization can be—for me, it is only getting harder year by year—and I feel ridiculously merciful. I also know how I would feel if I were in her place, and the tone of her voice when she humbly asked PSM Beisell if she can use her script told me she is as frustrated as me. This is a wire I despise walking with a peer so talented as Oetken—it is an issue with my very self that, now, is clear I must confront if I'm to advance in my abilities.

09/09/2020

Designers Hedman and Vondra were present tonight to set cues and Technical Director Schnoebelen was present to observe. Schnoebelen also took notes for Costume Designer Hayes.

In the afternoon, Hedman went over his cues with PSM Beisell and tonight she called cues in effort to attune herself to the process—she was nervous about calling the show. Her timing was satisfactory but for a handful of misses; as we aren't in tech rehearsal until tomorrow night, I believe she has a nice head start.

Knowing Hedman's abilities from previous work, I came into this production understanding his talent and counted on that to form the cornerstone of the spectacular elements of the show. As he ran through his cues tonight, he proved his worth. Multiple

cues were met with awe-induced vocalizations from the cast and management. Most notably, his use of star-pocked darkness as blackout or transition light and the swirling starfield drew reactions. I questioned him on why a morning scene in Act 1 Scene 1 was presented as a night scene; sensing his confusion, I explained that the scene begins with Henrietta in her fantasy space before she is snapped to reality—a chilly Sunday morning before church—by a pinch from her sister.

Equally impressive with his design, if not with a well-timed run of his cues, was Vondra. His original music compositions add much to the staging—particularly during the fantasy moments. His composition for the show’s finale evoked such emotion in the actors that one indicated she “choked up” at the moment Margaret’s symphony plays over the early twentieth-century radio. A few of his cues seemed to be misaligned with the script and the action, but he explained this at the end of rehearsal. His sound design is a lush addition to the production.

Schnoebelen had no notes for management or the cast but enjoyed seeing the show with some tech elements.

Technical elements of a show tend to bring something more out of actors. Dynamic and organic exploration increases. This is needed in this production as we have spent considerably longer time fumbling over lines than expected. Oetken, again, had to retrieve her script for a portion of Act 1; in fairness to her, she performed better tonight but suffered more mental stumbling as she attempted to get the lines out. At this point, I believe a night with no safety net is what she needs to complete her process—tomorrow night will be the last night she can call for lines. I don’t like to cut it so close or leave an actor to this merciless remedy; my patience is at its end and she must complete her process. As it stands,

I hope her performance in front of audiences will not suffer because she's so far behind the rest of the cast.

09/10/2020

We came together for our first light and sound technical rehearsal this evening. Nothing can replace the bustle of the first tech rehearsal. PSM Beisell prepared to call a show for the very first time. She was spending time with designers finalizing placement of cues. We didn't start at our expected 7:00 p.m. go time but were only delayed seven minutes. Advisor Smith attended the rehearsal.

The first real issue with the rehearsal came immediately at the beginning when Beisell's headset did not seem to work. Once this was rectified by Lighting Designer Hedman, we discovered we did not have a public address; Beisell had to vocally start the show. Smith informed Sound Designer Vondra at the intermission that it is imperative to have the PA—even a mock PA—for tomorrow's rehearsal. He also told Beisell she should be calling the cues and cue numbers to avoid confusion among the board operators; this came to bear in the second act when sound cues were one or two cues ahead or behind. Projections were also running behind as Beisell called cues and operated projections. To be honest, with such a handful of tasks and considering she's never done this before, her first night can be considered successful as she no doubt learned much. Real thanks must go to Hedman, who offered Beisell as much assistance as she needed and did so voluntarily at a moment's notice.

A light cue going from a star field to a morning exterior needed adjustment and I relayed this to Hedman, sitting at my right, immediately. This was the only significant

lighting adjustment I need mention—any others were related to cue timing or the like.

Sound was another issue. All night, we had sound cues in odd places, peculiar overlaps of sound cues and certain sound elements that did not match the needed duration. Many of these I corrected with Vondra, seated in front and to the right of me. We also conferred after rehearsal and discussed multiple issues as well as his suggestion to cut one of the piano cues at the end of Act 1.

Scenic Designer Ricard's projections are beautiful but their execution was messy due to Beisell having so many kettles on the stove at once. Hedman suggested we have a group discussion tomorrow to determine proper placement, duration and number of projections—we seem to have more than are necessary or can be adequately handled by Beisell at the show's finale (during which she is calling copious amounts of cues and running the projections).

Costume Designer Hayes was present but there were no significant costume issues. The cast has been working with the rehearsal masks he made, and I pointed out to him that Hudson's did not fit properly—Hayes already had a replacement plan. Also, several of the actress's gloves were much too tight. Again, this was noted by Hayes before I could mention it.

Acting energy was dead tonight and the cast knew it. As soon as I brought it up during notes, everyone nodded in agreement and I believe it was Ricard who said the cast had been talking about this during the rehearsal. I reminded them that the marriage of performance and technical can be exhausting but to be patient and drive forward. I must happily say that Oetken's performance was notably better. I anticipate she will have more improvement to offer tomorrow—I still believe she's cast correctly and I wish things had

gone differently for her this past week. Several lines were stumbled by multiple cast members; Hudson missed two entrances; Logan had to improvise some piano pantomiming due to a sound cue issue; Ricard's chair casters fell apart in the middle of a scene. All of this made for a strenuous evening but a learning experience for technicians and designers just coming into the process as well as for the actors. I considered my notes, offered the most pertinent ones and eliminated anything harsh I may have written down—and there was a lot. Ultimately, everyone knew what the issues were. While we may think we must point out every single flaw or correction—and there certainly is argument to be made for saying a matter has been addressed or not—I find it just as important to celebrate achievement in the face of mistakes or even outright defeat. Onward.

09/11/2020

Our second technical rehearsal fared better than the first due to some work by the designers and actors. Most of Oetken's line issues have been remedied. The Act 1 finale is still far from where it should be, with two of the interjected scenes of Annie and Williamina being skipped over or not cued in a way they could understand.

This afternoon, Light Designer Hedman, Scenic Designer Ricard and I had a summit on the projection issues. I thought we had it tied up but we're still not syncing the projections (operated by PSM Beisell) with the light cues (called by PSM Beisell). They are much too abrupt and don't fade in at all. It is evident we have taken a great stress off Beisell in the show's finale as we lessened the number of projections and combined others in sequence, so she can lend more attention to the more than forty cues she is calling in a little more than one page. She's really been a champ.

Sound Designer Vondra received some energetic attention from me tonight. Many of the transition sound cues don't go long enough—Advisor Caron, who attended tonight's rehearsal, agreed in some of his notes for me. I've also expressed a lack of understanding of some of his cues in the middle of scenes. He spoke to the situations with those and with many other cues I have found illogical, and I—somewhat regrettably—deflected his arguments. I know he is frustrated. I appreciate his talent as a composer and designer; we just need to get the right fit and now it doesn't fit. Faculty Scenic Designer John Paul attended tonight as well and suggested a sound cue for the moment Margaret crumbles emotionally and puts her elbows on the piano.

Caron offered what I felt were few but significant notes on the run. Largely, his notes mirrored notes I was going to make, have made that are still being integrated by tech or have thought should be made but have questioned. One of his notes that I've been struggling with is the blank cyclorama for the office sequences in general aside from certain special moments. I've contemplated the insertion of an environmental projection but have delayed that—I am sympathetic to Ricard and the amount of work she's doing. Caron's suggestion is sound and affirms a need. He also noted several of the sound issues aforementioned. There are blocking issues in Act 2 with the female characters showing an awkwardly-composed scheme. He mentioned how the hearing aid—other than when specifically mentioned—is rarely integrated into Henrietta's character, though she wears it almost constantly. I believe that if lines had not been an issue we would have organically resolved this situation by now—the escape from the script and the augmentation of organic acting techniques make such things come to life more than if an actor is trapped by the script. Also relating to Henrietta was the final piece of her character arc—Caron noted he

was not seeing the end result, which I contend is her acceptance of the idea of a legacy as revealed in one of her final dialogues with Margaret.

Finally, Movement Consultant Stark attended more to support the cast and crew than to offer notes and make suggestions. He asked if I had any issues to be resolved or if I required him to attend more rehearsals. I really can't say enough how much I've appreciated his involvement in this project.

The design team is working very hard. My management team and technicians as well. Even being a director who places Spectacle in its original Aristotelian position after the other five, the magic this artistic team brings adds a depth and breadth to the performance that goes beyond most studio shows I have seen at Minnesota State Mankato. Hedman paints a show with lighting accoutrements. Vondra composes with his heartstrings. Hayes gives energetically and anticipates my requests before they're made. And Ricard, acting and designing in this show, is thirsty for the wine of all Theatre's craft and never says "I can't." It is a blessing to have artists so capable who know what to do, how to do it and why it should or shouldn't be done.

Tech rehearsal three tomorrow.

09/12/2020

A decent run tonight but bugs still infest the show.

Faculty Sound Designer George Grubb attended—he noted that in one of the projections of a farmhouse, there were two figures standing near a porch which made him think of slaves. I hadn't considered this before but thankfully, Scenic Designer Ricard is

already planning to replace the projection for other reasons. He also mentioned to Sound Designer Vondra that the doorbell sounds too much like a fight bell.

Vondra and I had a discussion, again, about the fit of certain sound cues. I'm discouraged by one cue that comes out of nowhere during one of the fantastical letter scenes. We agreed it may fit better at Peter's entrance and reintroduction to reality right after this fantasy scene.

Projections are still a mess. I can't determine if it's a mechanical error or a human error. Lighting Designer Hedman theorized it may be an issue with the lamp in the projector. He thinks perhaps the first 50 percent of a faded in projection may be too dark, and the last 50 percent seems to jump in too quickly. This may be why the projections seem to come in much too quickly and too abruptly. He will investigate. Also, Ricard is going to find an office projection so we don't have a bare cyclorama for the office scenes and will clean up some other unnecessary projections in effort to make an easier time for PSM Beisell.

The performers continue to solidify their roles. Some issues remain in the Act 1 finale but it's getting very close.

I'm feeling pretty good about all this.

09/13/2020

Faculty Costume Designer David McCarl joined us for our first dress rehearsal tonight. His big note for Costume Designer Hayes is that Peter would not wear a gray shirt in the time period—it would have been white unless he was working class. Hayes asked if we should maintain his concept for the show or adjust for historical accuracy. I told him we

should be as historically accurate as possible. Other than this, the costumes looked great and added to the characters, the scenery, the story. At one point, Oetken's shoulder mantle got in the way of her hearing aid cable but she can easily remedy this without worry. I also questioned whether Benson would be wearing pants in the final scenes, and Hayes indicated she was wearing Gaucho pants—looking again, I saw they were pants and not a skirt. Hayes is going to consider options for making this more obvious.

No light issues to consider, and Hedman's design is more beautiful to me with each rehearsal. He caught a tracking issue tonight and said he would fix it before tomorrow.

Projections. Again, not perfect, but the issues are becoming less and less. I think with a few tweaks and some more confidence from PSM Beisell, this should be remedied by tomorrow. We'll eliminate one more slide and move the cue for a sequence of slides in the show finale. I instructed Beisell that the final video should play through until it ends before she calls lights and sound at the very end of the show even if the dialogue has finished—even if it's in 30 seconds of silence, I want the video to complete.

Last rehearsal tomorrow night, then majors' preview on Tuesday. We're so very close. It's going to be good.

09/14/2020

A writer and a photographer from *The Reporter* attended this evening. The photographer shot pictures for the whole of Act 1 from all around the auditorium. The writer asked me a handful of questions, some of which I coaxed out of her. I'll hope the article is a good one.

A minor SNAFU occurred when PSM Beisell attempted to test the projections. Nothing would come up for her. Lighting Designer Hedman went to the booth to investigate; the computer would recognize the projector, but the QLab program would not. Hedman called Faculty Sound Designer Grubb, but also restarted the program in the meantime. By the time Hedman spoke to Grubb, the program was running and recognizing the projector.

The run of the show proceeded beautifully. Even with the photographer clicking around the space, the concert of designs and performers worked harmoniously and, seemingly, effortlessly for the very first time. It was beautiful to watch. Only a half of a page of notes lined my tablet at the end of the rehearsal: Beisell needs to soften her cue calls as I could hear her (and texted her to quiet down during the run) from the booth. Some positive remarks on actors' energy and tempos came next, and a few minor scenic and properties notes. The satisfied feeling I have right now is due to the work of the cast, management and creative teams. Success is theirs for tonight, at least.

Tomorrow night is the majors' preview and a couple more interviews with press.

09/15/2020

About 25 students attended the majors' preview performance/final dress rehearsal this evening. The magic of theatre—the elements came together with the addition of an audience and provided a beautiful work of theatre. A sound cue was bumped in the wrong place, but it fit. Oetken misplaced a line about complications at the beginning of Act 2. This being all, I released cast and crew with my thanks for a job well done.

If the run goes as magically as tonight did, we are in fine shape. Onward.

09/16/2020

I received an email this morning from an actor that she was exhibiting cold-like symptoms and would be staying home to rest in hopes of combatting them. While she has been under stress with studies and her role, she had believed the symptoms might be tied to that stress, allergies or other situations. As the symptoms became more akin to those of a cold, she determined to rest.

I responded she should rest and I would be in touch. I forwarded her email to Advisor Caron and sent a text message to him advising him of such. He advised that he was in a meeting and would call back, which he did. He had spoken to this actress between our messages and advised her to take the daily COVID-19 screening all are expected to take before coming to campus. She did not pass the screening which, obviously, meant she could not come to campus and hence cannot act in tonight's opening performance. Caron advised me (even previous to this finding) that we should consider someone to walk on. I had already settled on asking ASM Emma Anderson as she has ability as an actress and has been at rehearsals noting the blocking and doing line notes among her other duties. She agreed she could walk on but would need a script.

With all hands on deck, including Caron's, we began the triage process. Caron reached out to Faculty Costume Designer David McCarl about needing to ensure the costume would work for Anderson. McCarl advised that she come in as early as possible this afternoon, and an email he sent indicated "we will make this work!" This came at about the same time I was emailing Costume Designer Hayes about the situation. During this time, I was also in regular email contact with the actress—who obviously felt horrible with

the situation. I did my very best to provide solace though I know such solace is hard to find. With our best feet forward, the team moves on in hopes she will be rejoining us very soon.

Our afternoon is shaping up with Anderson going to the costume shop around 1:45 p.m. and meeting with me at 4 p.m. to go over crucial blocking notes and other character elements with her.

I am now composing a curtain speech which I will deliver before the show explaining that we will have Anderson walking on for a role. Time to take off the stress hat and put on the eloquence hat.

The ailing actress reported via email to Caron and me that she was able to see a doctor this afternoon. With any degree of luck, she said, we should know within 24 hours whether she will be returning to the cast. I stopped into the costume shop to ask if Anderson had been in. Faculty Costume Shop Supervisor Scott Anderson indicated she had and he only needed to make a small adjustment for her.

At 3:21 p.m., I had a message from a production team member that she needed to call me immediately. I asked her to please do so. When I answered the phone, she was in tears indicating one of her roommates tested positive for COVID-19. Multiple members of the production team live in this household. I immediately contacted Matt Caron, who indicated they needed to take the self-screening on the university website. After instructing them to do so, I got a cell phone screenshot from one of them showing her restricted from campus. She said the other team member received the same result. I immediately texted Caron, who called me back; as we were talking, Department Chair Julie Kerr-Berry called him, so we left the conversation until they could discuss the situation.

A quote I must paraphrase as I don't know the original wording is something to the effect of "trumpeting your intentions is a sure way to hear God laugh." Perhaps the fact that two newspapers and a radio station came around for interviews regarding staging a show in a pandemic was an ill omen.

A conference between members of the Theatre and Dance faculty was in progress when I arrived on campus at about 4:30 p.m. Caron told me they didn't think we could go forward and *Silent Sky* would be cancelled. He went to the box office to inform David Loudermilk; Loudermilk, who's own thesis show has been impacted by COVID-19, indicated he would be willing to step in to run the production if that meant the show could go on. This, in concert with a series of in-person and electronic communications with Hudson, offered a resuscitation of sorts. I called Hudson and we spoke about the possibility of his wife, Rachael, walking on. She agreed and the show stayed alive.

The Hudsons arrived around 5:30 p.m. as I was walking Loudermilk through the prompt book and cues. When I finished working with Loudermilk I worked through the entire script with Rachael Hudson to give her a skeletal understanding of the blocking as well as some very minor character notes—enough to allow for her to walk through the show with a script in hand. To our benefit, she had seen the show during majors' preview the previous night so she at least knew the story, the concept and some of the motivation behind the character. This helped immensely.

The show ran seamlessly as far as the tech aspects were concerned. Loudermilk managed the production as well as if he were involved from its inception. Hedman also agreed to work on the production team for the night. Rachael Hudson carried off the role

with instinct and a bit of guidance; obviously this was a triage situation and she did it with grace. It was not a perfect performance, nor was it expected to be. Rachael's presence allowed the cast and remaining crew to enjoy an opening night.

Several of the department faculty and leadership were present for the performance. Department Chair Julie Kerr-Berry, Graduate Coordinator Heather Hamilton, Professor Vladimir Rovinsky, Advisor Caron and Movement Consultant Stark were present and offered their positive, if mercifully supportive, approval of the show. I appreciated the soft touch they gave in responding to the work though the show was far from ideal. Paul J. Hustoles—the former chair of the department and my former advisor—attended as well, offering supportive congratulations.

I videoed the performance so an archival copy would exist if the show could not go forward. This was the best option to document the performance.

09/17/2020

So much has happened today. Emails and telephone calls between people at all levels of faculty and administration were ongoing with key elements communicated to me as possible.

To summarize, department leadership met with university leadership and determined all theatrical productions would be halted for two weeks. Essentially, the season—including *Silent Sky*—is pushed back two weeks. This means that—barring any catastrophic issues related to the pandemic—we are merely postponed, set to return Oct. 1. All the other productions will follow suit. My understanding is that the department faculty will meet tomorrow to discuss other augmentations to the season.

Due to what has happened with COVID-19 in the department this week, I decided to get tested for the virus. Results could be available within 24 hours.

I am very hopeful for my show to go forward even if delayed.

09/18/2020

My COVID-19 test results showed “undetected.” At least I don’t have the virus, but I’ll remain at home for the time being—all things with the production are postponed so I might as well ensure my health and safety.

I received an email from our convalescing actress indicating she has a conflict with the Saturday, Oct. 3 performances. I instructed her to inform Advisor Caron right away; I also emailed him in case she is delayed in doing so. I will plan to have ASM Anderson walk on if this conflict can’t be resolved, but I need to get Caron’s thoughts before I instruct her to start memorizing.

09/23/2020

There has been much conversation amongst faculty and students regarding our situation as a department. I’ve refrained from making journal entries regarding all of my conversations and communications as they would prove too copious for publication.

Tonight, Advisor Caron held Zoom meetings with the casts and crews of *Silent Sky* and *Hair*. This was so Caron had opportunity to listen to the concerns of cast, crew and production teams as we go forward through this COVID-19 problem. He expressed that the leadership of the department has received numerous emails from students regarding the decision to reopen the season Oct. 2 (still the current plan, as far as I know). Many more

than were expected have expressed worry about reopening when it took only one day for the season to completely spiral out of control.

Members of my team expressed several points that bear repeating. The overall concern is that a two-week delay does not seem to be enough; several team-members expressed this or agreed with this. There is a concern that even for people who have tested negative for COVID-19, it may not be enough time for a false negative to rear its head and cast us into another whirlwind of rescheduling or cancelling shows. Still other students expressed concern that even apart from this initial incident, another incident could happen anytime affecting any number of the team or teams.

One team member very calmly expressed frustration knowing that eleven students in the department knowingly pushed safety aside and nothing has been said by the department regarding this. The feeling is that there needs to be a certain “holding accountable” of the student cast and crew members who did not use sound judgment in adhering to safety protocols (there is no indication those *Silent Sky* company members exhibited any unsafe behavior or were included in the eleven students mentioned here). Caron indicated he understood the frustration but expressed that the department cannot mandate what does or doesn’t happen off-campus. Another team member pressed further saying it is depressing to know that the hard work of the shows in production have been jeopardized by people not honestly answering the daily screening questions on the mnsu.edu homepage—a requirement for students to come to campus. There seems no way to force students to adhere to the guidelines established by the University including honest participation in the daily screening survey.

Other concerns included a feeling that the department is hanging on to the idea of returning to a normal theatre season while most other theatre departments are doing no shows or are doing shows in more non-traditional ways via streaming online or other methods and a feeling that students' educational experience held second place behind the department's box office income. Caron explained that the department, being non-profit, isn't interested in making money and that whatever money made by the department is spent; this year, little money is being made from ticket sales and so less money is going to be spent. Education, he said, remains the focus of the department; part of that education is the participation in productions and the faculty and administration do not want to take that out of the student experience. Another team member agreed with this, indicating that temperature checks of patrons and students could be mandated as they are at other events in the region. The elimination of visitors to the green room would be another step toward eliminating contact between a production's company and the public. Caron indicated that it is against department policy to allow visitors to the green room in any event so it shouldn't be an issue—it became clear to all of us that this policy needs to be revisited and understood.

An overall lack of communication was called out by several team members who indicated they had heard of the rescheduling through ticket holders or the media before they were notified personally. Some of this probably rests on my shoulders as the massive amount of communication between so many people trying to resolve the situation changed rapidly—sometimes minute-to-minute. One day, Caron and I spoke on the telephone five times and emailed nearly a dozen times. Last Wednesday was a mad dash to stay in

communication as situations evolved constantly. Nonetheless, my communication with the company could have been more fruitful without being copious.

I stayed silent for most of the meeting. I spoke up at the end, expressing that this meeting was not my place to talk. Still, I wanted to take the time regardless of what happens going forward to express my appreciation for the entire cast, crew and creative team; that I wouldn't cast anyone differently or choose different designers or management team or technical crew; that I hoped we could come together to finish the run but even if we couldn't I felt so happy, pleased and proud of the work everyone has done on the show.

We ended the meeting still questioning what will happen next week—or the next or the next. Sound Designer Vondra lightened the mood a bit—he has compiled an album of his original compositions for the show and plans to offer everyone on the team a copy in a digital or physical format.

I so miss my team. I hope we can re-open even if it isn't next week. I hope my actress regains her health and returns to the role. I also hope it works out that ASM Anderson can walk on since I've now asked her twice to do so. I hope my production personnel can return to their jobs for a run in front of an audience that isn't a preview. I hope people can see this beautiful thing we have done together. Wonder will get us there—Henrietta told us that. I hope there is enough wonder to allow us to proceed and do so safely.

09/25/2020

The department received emails from Department Chair Kerr-Berry and Managing Director Caron today. Kerr-Berry announced that the reopening of the season would be

pushed back to Oct. 8, meaning *Silent Sky* has another week for cast and crew to rest and recuperate from the COVID-19 scare. The safety of our people is paramount; I'm concerned for adding a third week separating our next performance from our first performance but this should allow for recovery of our ailing actress.

I emailed my team and asked them to keep the work fresh in their mind however possible. It appears I'll only be able to rehearse one night before we re-open so individual work is paramount to keeping the material piping hot.

Caron's email detailed the new season dates and exclusivities. The department cancelled *Hay Fever* and shortened *Angel Street*. Everything else looks like a simple readjustment of show dates.

10/08/2020

We came back tonight for a "welcome back" rehearsal as the show resumes. To my pleasant surprise, the cast picked up where we left off—perhaps even with a bit more enthusiasm than before. We were fortunate to be able to welcome back all team members who had been afflicted with or affected by COVID-19 in their households.

PSM Beisell and ASM Anderson have expressed to me previously that this Saturday's matinee and evening performances are conflicts for them as they both had previous commitments prior to the COVID-19 postponement. Lighting Designer Hedman agreed to run the production for the matinee performance as I also have a previous commitment. I will be running the production for the Saturday evening performance.

Advisor Caron will film the performance on Saturday evening. This is wonderful news as we will now have an archived copy of not only the performance with Rachael Hudson's walk-on performance, but with the full cast as was intended.

We're back.

10/09/2020

We re-opened the show tonight with 30 people in attendance. The cast and crew fired on all cylinders. The excitement of being able to come back, I believe, buoyed our actress who fell ill to COVID-19. The rest of the cast responded in kind, energized by being able to perform as a cohesive unit in front of an audience. A few lines were paraphrased with minimal stumbling and the overall performance was as I had hoped.

Two shows tomorrow with some production team missing due to previous engagements that were not initially seen as scheduling challenges due to the postponement of the season. We will live.

10/10/2020

Lighting Designer Ryan Hedman managed the show for the afternoon matinee, playing to 26 audience members. No issues were reported; I was absent due to a previously-scheduled conflict (again, the issues of postponement).

I managed the show for the evening performance in front of 22 audience members. I flubbed one cue call during the final sequence of what seems like a thousand individual cues, but our technicians are so in-tune with the production that they ran their cues appropriately in light of my errant call. No performance issues to report; Advisor Caron recorded the show and the entire team provided an excellent performance for the archive.

10/11/2020

Twenty-three people attended the closing matinee of *Silent Sky*. I'm not ashamed to say that I will miss this production profoundly but am also happy to say we have gotten through, albeit, perhaps, in pieces. None the worse for wear, thankfully, and I believe we have produced a work of art stunning with its spectacle, honest in the portrayal of real and fictitious characters, timely in its subject matter and important for its inspirational message I've heretofore beaten to death in description. I'm thrilled that I had the opportunity to work with the actors, designers, technicians and mentors that have engaged completely and tirelessly with this thesis production.

We still have a Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival response upcoming thanks to the Vimeo file (no respondents were able to attend in person). I wait patiently but nervously to hear what people outside our department and regular audience have to say about it.

10/17/2020

We enjoyed a positive response to the show from Rusty Ruth of Wayne State College and Deidre Ensz-Mattox of Hutchinson Community College. More detail will be provided in other chapters, but the overall impression from them was happiness in seeing that theatre can still be done with splendor in these overwhelming pandemic times. Ruth spoke to this eloquently, saying that his "being able to show appreciation should not be taken lightly." I agree, and I'm pleased he was able to do so. Ensz-Mattox was impressed that even with the actors in masks, she was not taken out of the characters' world and had very little problem with the actors' diction. Both indicated they wish they could see it live

for the show's spectacle, but conveyed they received adequate “wow-factor” even in the archival recording. Directing notes for me included good picturization, the use of poignant moments performed without artifice, organic rhythms, natural presentation in tune with the script, and the mathematical and musical precision of the action. As said before, more comments from the responders will be featured in other chapters.

With this entry from the KCACTF response, I happily conclude this journal for *Silent Sky*. It goes without saying that Henrietta and her colleagues will go with me. As Henrietta said in her final lines, wonder will always get us there. It is that wonder, or sense of wonderment and hope, that pulled me through what was a delightful process fraught with challenges avoidable and unavoidable. No doubt, this was true for the company as well. But wonder—and perhaps a small bit of sweat, tears, alcohol and devotion—got us here. I'm so glad the company of *Silent Sky* is here with me.

CHAPTER 4

POST-PRODUCTION ANALYSIS: SEND MORE SKY

This chapter will contain a post-production analysis of James C. Van Oort's direction of *Silent Sky* by Lauren Gunderson. The production opened September 16, 2020 and was quickly halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic afflicting an actress and threatening the production personnel. This and other COVID-19 infections led the Department of Theatre and Dance to postpone all productions in the extant season. The production reopened Friday, October 9 for four shows, closing Sunday, October 11. The director will examine and analyze the reactions of the audience to the performance, successes and failures in the dramatic execution in the text, execution of all design elements and the plays reception as an invited production to the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region V Festival 53 held online due to pandemic restrictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted audiences to twenty-five percent of house capacity; this necessary restriction notwithstanding, audiences reacted favorably to the performances and to the production elements of the production. The student preview of the performance was well-received by an audience of about forty students. The opening night performance—marred by the frightening sudden illness of a cast member and the potential exposure of two members of the production crew—saw a moderate audience of about 25 react sympathetically to the production. While the director, faculty advisors and cast were grateful for the last-minute walk-on performance by Rachel Hudson, the production was not as cohesive or coherent—this would have been the case regardless of

who walked on for the role. Fortunately, Hudson is a talented actress and her efforts made the production's opening more palatable than it could have been under the circumstances. The director's friend and colleague David T. Loudermilk insisted on helping the production crew to ensure the production would open; all were grateful to him for lending his talent to the opening night performance.

In Chapter 1, the director outlined the expression of perseverance despite oppression as a landmark message in the play. Henrietta embodies the struggle toward discovery knowing she will never see with mortal eyes the consequences of her work. The pursuit of dreams makes a difference; what we do and have done matters. The transcendental feel of the play combined with the twenty years of Henrietta Leavitt's life at Harvard effectively morphed the struggle of the astronomer and her colleagues into a reflection of human struggle in the face of oppression—a necessary theme in today's transitory cultural environment.

The commitment of the actors to the text and to the work brought this struggle to life over the course of the performance run. Indeed, with the specter of COVID-19 overshadowing the run, the actors persevered—perhaps more so than they would have without the pandemic—in effort to offer this testament to the human spirit. Oetken gave an adequately reserved but ambitious portrayal of Henrietta; Via Logan's portrayal of the traditional but strong sister Margaret balanced that of Oetken's Henrietta. Ty Hudson as Peter Shaw brought a comedic lightness to the work but provided a haunting dominance representing the oppressive masculine society of the time. Grace Ricard, like Hudson, provided a motherly comedic warmth but also a strong feminine force in the character of Williamina Fleming, and Morgan Benson's cerebral approach to Annie Canon offered a

fascinating character arc that spanned the role of women from decades before up until the suffrage movement.

The need for masking and social distancing was also outlined in Chapter 1.

Audiences, while unused to seeing actors in protective masks, did not express displeasure toward this unfortunate necessity. Indeed, it was said by more than one audience member that after the first few minutes of the play, the masks became subdued and less noticeable. This is a testament to the abilities of the actors to transmit a character with such a barricade; it indicates that if a story is performed well with attention to the necessary aspects of a production, the suspension of disbelief will allow an audience to be unbothered by out-of-place distractions. The physical aspects of the actors' work and the design elements working in concert almost vanquished this distracting but necessary aspect of the production.

Further, the use of movement under the tutelage of Dance Director Daniel Stark reduced the need for physical contact. Really, Stark's suggestions and the work he did with the actors synced the true-to-life approach to realistic acting with the more nebulous stylized concept of "mystical science" sought by the director. Love scenes took place in Henrietta's star field and involved no physical contact. The dance-like movements combined with the light, sound and scenic elements to meld human elements with stellar elements. The final moments of the play offered a portrayal of the death of each character and likewise their placement in the heavens as stars. Again, through movement and spectacle, this was achieved in an elegant and uncomplicated (at least as far as the acting is concerned) manner.

Production elements accentuated the mystic science concept as envisioned by the director. Ricard, doubling as an actor and as Scenic Designer, provided a stage floor reminiscent of a star chart or map of the constellations with a raised platform upstage to

serve as the office space. This platform office space, though part of a much larger configuration, lent to a cramped attic feel needed to present the cramped situation of the women crammed into the corner of a Harvard attic. The blues and violets of the painted floor gave an illusory depth to the stage pinpointed with stars and constellations that, when augmented with the proper light, positioned the characters in space. This kept the thought of the cosmos omnipresent during the show. The platform doubled as an ocean liner's observation deck during those scenes and worked marvelously toward that end. All of this kept with Gunderson's suggestion that sets remain simple, representational and flexible with stars shining constantly.

The deep thrust configuration in the Andreas Theatre effectively allowed for the realism and the transcendentalism of the show to meld and diverge beautifully. Effective distances between characters (from Wisconsin to Massachusetts to ocean liners on the Atlantic) were punctuated by proximities on stage and separation with lighting effects. All space on the stage was connected in the star field indicated in Chapter 1.

Ricard's work with properties representative to the period, if not completely accurate, was exquisite. She crafted photographic glass star plates, augmented pencils and notebooks to emulate early 20th century writing accoutrements, fabricated devices to be used as the star spankers used by the women to measure light intensity, assembled furniture that appeared period-accurate and scavenged from a Harvard attic storage area, and so much more. Her overall vision with the scenic design and the creation and assembly of properties offered a melding of early 20th century realism and the stylized reality of the mystic science and astronomy. However, the large baby grand piano downstage right would have been better served by a smaller piano; this was not an option available to the production and some

of the movement patterns, picturization and composition were sacrificed for it. This was not any fault of Ricard's design; rather, it was an issue of available resources.

Additionally, Ricard designed projections cast onto a massive upstage cyclorama offering further opportunity for more impressive scene changes, star field sequences and other particulars. Handwritten letters from Margaret appeared on the cyc as Henrietta read them; images of antiquated office spaces, postcard images of ocean liners, antique photographs of small midwestern towns and of academic buildings at Harvard helped Ricard paint the various scenes and added to the magic of her design. Most impressive was her finale collage, incorporating video of astronomical images from the Hubble Space Telescope and photographs of the historic characters as they were in life culminating in a video sequence of a pinpoint of light growing into an all-encompassing light. This beautiful montage no doubt resulted in audience members suffering sizable lumps in the throat. Cast, crew, design team and the director were not immune to this.

Sound Designer Frank Vondra provided original composition and arrangement of several musical pieces for the production. When the production closed, he took his design and created an album from his design called *Hearts and Stars* based on an exchange between Henrietta and Williamina. It is important to note Vondra's work as a composer and arranger—this facet of his abilities as a designer has made his work stand out. Vondra was passed to the national level of the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival for his sound design on this show. He will, no doubt, continue to create impressive designs.

Vondra used music from Gustav Holst's *The Planets* in his music for intermission and preshow. The recurring hymn *For the Beauty of the Earth* by Folliett Pierpont circles back time after time in the play; Vondra also weaved this hymn into the symphony Margaret is

composing. While an historic anachronism, Vondra used a version of Charles Trenet's *La Mer* for music during the ocean liner love scene between Henrietta and Peter—he processed this in a way to sound as if coming through a 1910s or 1920s radio or phonograph.

Anachronism aside, the sound fit the action and the mood. Vondra also composed the sense-numbing triad that runs almost incessantly during the final two pages of Act I. This was a choice the director instructed Vondra he would need to prove fit the scheme of the design; in the end, Vondra used the pattern in the show's finale too, blending it into the overall sonic montage he composed to bring the production to a close. Thematically, the passage felt hypnotic in a laudanum-induced manner; an anesthetic feel came from it due to its repetitive and uninteresting nature. Chromatic influence in notes that sometimes went askew and ultimately returned to “normal” added to this narcotic feeling. After some time, the effect of this sound element gave way to the idea of moving from true-to-life into the mystic star field at the end of both acts. It remains, however, a choice in which the director is not wholly invested.

The final soundscape in the last scene, much like Ricard's projection montage, is one of Vondra's most beautiful contributions. Included are the three-note run mentioned above, the Pierpont hymn in the guise of one strain of Margaret's symphony, and a “space-scape” sort of underscore. Initially, this sounded much more like a 1980s VHS introduction; at the first mention of this impression, Vondra went back to the studio and polished it into something more mystic and inspiring.

Vondra's compositions kept with Gunderson's wish that Margaret's piano playing seem live and singular—including erroneous notes on the keyboard whilst in conversation—but become a fully-encompassing sound. It was noted in Chapter 1 and in concept meetings

that original music had been composed by Jenny Giering, but Vondra boldly determined to create original compositions which proved to be of great benefit to the production.

Importantly, Vondra was also tasked with designing a soundscape for Henrietta's deafness which to be heard when she removes her hearing aid. This "sound of deafness" was to transition into an incongruous "sound of space" effect to be used in Henrietta's star field (and also later used as part of Vondra's finale soundscape). The challenge of making the sound of deafness as well as the sound of space—both of which presumably have no sound or at least a sound not known to most humans—was accepted almost enthusiastically by Vondra. The sounds amount to long-held chords on a non-descript synthesizer setting—something one might expect of a song in the New Age genre—with a hollow but rich quality which sought to bring the audience into Henrietta's contemplative and intellectual headspace. The "sound of space" effect, essentially the same, brought audiences into the skyscape of Henrietta's star field.

Vondra's piano compositions needed to work in ways that provided Logan's Margaret character—who often "played" the fake piano—an organic way to present the playing of a non-playable piano. He used a speaker inside the piano and had tracks which could be easily stopped and started when Logan "started" or "stopped" playing. Soundboard Operator Faith Peterson's keen eye was necessary in making sure the starting and stopping happened at just the right moment. Vondra also had a cue for the instant Margaret collapses in tears upon the piano keyboard; again, Peterson's timing needed to be precise for this cue to work live. It always did. These piano cues needed to be as near to perfect as could be without using a live piano. Vondra created cues that worked for both the actor and the board operator.

The lighting design of the show needed to provide true-to-life lighting in realistic settings such as the old place in Wisconsin, the Harvard attic office and the home of Henrietta in Massachusetts. Likewise, it needed to provide a perception of being in the sky—whether in Henrietta’s mystic star field or in a stylized scene representing outer space. A seascape for the ocean liner segments needed to mix the dreamlike with the true-to-life, and those scenes which presented the passage of time very quickly over a few sentences needed to seem as if years were passing in a few seconds. In short, the design needed to enhance picturization and composition both realistically and fantastically. Lighting Designer Ryan Hedman satisfied these requirements effortlessly.

While stars were indicated in paint on the stage floor and in projection photos and videos, Hedman also included them in the lighting design. One of his most interesting design elements, a moving gobo projecting a swirling galaxy, placed Henrietta Leavitt representationally in the center of a cosmos of questions and possible discoveries. Perhaps an uncomplicated and obvious choice for a show such as this, but Hedman used it masterfully to create poetry in light. His color palette, including so many colors from the spectrum, was used deftly. Warm ambient tones lit the farm home in Wisconsin, the stuffy and cramped office at Harvard, and Henrietta’s house in Massachusetts. Cool blues and violets with a gobo effect provided a moving liquid surface for the ocean liner scenes; all the colors of the spectrum seemed present in the star field scenes.

Other techniques Hedman used are subtle (it is said a good lighting design should almost go unnoticed) but magical in a show such as this. He unified or isolated spaces and even characters. Direct address spotlights isolated downstage left and right corners as well as upstage center on the platform. A chase effect illustrated the passage of time in the office;

a spotlight for Peter's lecture downstage placed the audience in a lecture hall. Of course, as with the other designers, Hedman's final lighting sequence with its colors, gobo effects and attentive harmony with other design elements metamorphosized the characters from a fleshy life of work and discovery to a great cosmic afterlife.

It should be noted that Hedman stepped in to manage the show (calling cues, ensuring the smooth operation of all production elements during performance) during the Saturday matinee when Beisell and Anderson were unavailable due to the run being postponed to a weekend with scheduling conflicts. Hedman was also instrumental in the implementation of Ricard's projection designs. It could be said that Hedman was the technologist-in-charge for this production; the monkey-wrenches he vanquished were many and his abilities as a technician as well as designer were indispensable. He did not hesitate to assist regardless of the task at hand. Directors and producers would be wise to solicit and retain Hedman as a designer or technician; he is a craftsman of very high order.

Costume design, it was noted in Chapter 1, needed to reflect clothing of the early 20th Century American style, and should be realistic. Costume Designer Ethan Hayes provided this satisfactorily. Special pieces like the suffragette sash worn by Annie Canon and the hearing aid worn by Henrietta were appropriate; the Gaucho pants Annie wore at the end of the play did not have the desired effect as they appeared to be a dress, but the thought behind them was sound. Hayes clearly wanted to remain true to the history and provide pants that were appropriate; the flowing nature of the large pant legs made it difficult to assess that Annie was actually—in defiance of cultural mores of the time—wearing pants instead of a dress or skirt. The costume appeared to have an effect both visual and tactile on Benson as she played the arc of Annie's character—this pants-wearing

element of the character represented the last portion of the character's arc in the story. Hayes's choice of fabrics and colors reflected the period and culture of the time while remaining harmonious with the other design elements.

Importantly, Hayes met the challenge of masking the actors with protective masks that appeared to be period pieces of costume. Of course, they were not as people did not wear protective masks other than for a short time during the Spanish Flu pandemic which would have occurred in the latter moments of the play. Nonetheless, Hayes's design of the masks using fabric and colors matching those of the regular costumes was superb to the point that they almost disappeared into the other costume elements. No audience member expressed dismay to the director about the masks; the only comments received about the masks is that after a time they seemed to not even be present on the actors. One problem existed with this and that was the mask worn by Hudson, which continuously slipped below his nose. Despite attempts to fix this issue, it remained a problem throughout the run but did happen less as time went on.

Together, the design elements synergized to create the effects desired. True-to-life characters and events took place in a space that swam between realism and a transcendental-feeling star field, as Gunderson calls it. While spectacle is the last on the list of Aristotelian elements of drama, the effects employed by the design team thoroughly enhanced the performances of the actors, met the challenges of the director and honored the work of the playwright. Importantly, they did this with the attitude of reverence for the character's plights and situations; this was a spectacle-heavy show, but that spectacle served the purpose of telling the stories of Annie, Williamina and most especially Henrietta. As the

transcendental nature of the play suggests, these stories become more those of humanity and the design elements allowed that suggestion to go further with audiences.

With contemporary tribulations in mind, the commitment of all involved must be brought into focus. The production—the first scheduled in the 2020-21 season—served as something of a laboratory specimen for the department. If this production could get on its feet and enjoy a successful run, perhaps the remainder of the season could as well. *Hair* was also in production on the mainstage of the Ted Paul Theatre at this time, scheduled to open after *Silent Sky*. A mainstage production of *The Tempest* in the Andreas Theatre began ramping up. When the pandemic afflicted the Department of Theatre and Dance on September 16, 2020, the initial momentum of the season came to a very sudden standstill. The director was informed of a performer's illness with scarcely any time to adapt; a series of phone conversations between the director and Matthew Caron in his capacity as Managing Director and Faculty Advisor ensued—sometimes upwards of three phone calls within as many minutes. With just hours before opening, the director, Caron, Professors Heather Hamilton and Daniel Stark and Director of Public Relations Corrie Eggiman met accidentally in Eggiman's office for a frantic and spirit-crushing back-and-forth on the opening or closing of the production. From one minute to the next, the show was either opening or closing. Remedies were tossed left and right; forbearance and disappointment continued to emerge.

With coaxing from Ty Hudson, Rachel Hudson reluctantly agreed to walk on in our ill actress's stead. As mentioned previously, Loudermilk determined to assist with managing the show's production elements so we could enjoy, at least, the opening of the show even if it could not go on from there. The production opened and then closed immediately as the

entire season was postponed until October 1. Later, this would be pushed back an additional week to October 8 to further ensure safety of the company, department and audiences. This came about after multiple discussions within the department and university leadership. Thankfully, this proved to be a safe option allowing *Silent Sky* and the remainder of the season to continue cautiously and curiously. While this postponement did allow the production and the season to continue, it meant that mainstage productions of *Hay Fever* would be cancelled and *Angel Street* would play a shortened run.

The blessings of Rachel Hudson and Loudermilk can't be overstated; another blessing in ASM Anderson must be recalled too. After the postponement of the season was announced, a performer was still suffering illness. In preparation for the show to go on, the director asked Anderson to prepare to play a role in the performance. As ASM, Anderson was familiar with the intricacies of the show including blocking and relationships. Anderson was the most likely candidate to consider for this possibility and she undertook this with seriousness and attention. While the production was extremely fortunate to welcome our original actress back to her role for the remainder of the run, there was heartbreak knowing that Anderson would not be taking the stage so her work could be seen and appreciated. A talented actress, Anderson deserves attention for her abilities and her willingness to sacrifice for the company when called upon.

Specific to the cast, it was wonderful to see Oetken, Benson, Ricard, Logan and Hudson take to the characters as they did—and in many ways continue to do. When the Perseverance rover and Ingenuity helicopter landed on Mars February 18, 2021, an exchange between some of the actors began on Facebook. On February 23, Benson reposted a Facebook post from Hugh Hou showing an image of the Martian landscape from the

Perseverance rover, a spectacular night sky overhead. Benson slugged this post with the simple word “Amazing.” Oetken replied “Henrietta, Annie and Wil [sic] would be proud” followed by a heart emoticon. Benson’s response: “ugh. That just made my heart swell. Indeed, they would be” followed by a double-heart emoticon (Hou). While the landscape photo was taken by Perseverance, the sky shown in the image was not from a vantage on Mars. It spoke to Benson and Oetken nonetheless. The thoughts it inspired in them deserved those heart emoticons. The director added one of his own.

Each cast member brought her or his individual cavalcade of abilities to the play. Oetken presents a subdued physicality that is calculated but natural to the character. She exhibited dynamic vocal characteristics, particularly regarding tonal and tension variance. Importantly for a character like Henrietta, Oetken offered a depth and sophistication necessary for the role. Being masked, emoting with facial gestures is difficult but Oetken emotes with her eyes in ways enviable to other actors. She presented the frustration of the character fighting for discovery through the oppression of the unseen men of the show (other than Peter) in tangible physical and vocal tension. As the play reached its end, she melded this with the physical illness that was killing Henrietta—it was apparent that Oetken’s Henrietta was pierced by the fatal sting that ended her life. Mixed with the pressing need to continue her work, Oetken’s Henrietta was compellingly frustrated. A sweetness perfumed the character in a loving feminine way. The romance between Henrietta and Peter was almost tactile though the two characters never touched physically and—indeed—never saw their romance realized. The desire was there in an innocent way—sweet and honest—and Oetken provided that sweet honesty with little guidance.

It should also be said that more depth could have been explored if Oetken could have given up the script earlier in the process—this was a challenge up to the moment of the student preview, and a distressing one. Given the fine performance Oetken gave as Henrietta, one can only imagine how much richer that character would have been if memorization was completed earlier and the real blood-and-guts of acting could have been mined sooner. This said, her portrayal was beautiful.

Via Logan's portrayal of Margaret was lovely and charming but certainly not quaint. Such a trap—playing the character in a quaint melodramatic fashion—could easily tempt lesser actors. Logan approached this character with a seriousness blended with sweetness; a strong softness with which she attacked the role. It made perfect sense for Margaret. Looking back farther, director's notes from the audition process indicated Logan "has become so talented," offered "so very fitting physical and vocal dynamics" for her audition piece. At every turn, the sense was that Logan understood who her character was, why she does and says the things she does, every nuance in her relationship with Henrietta. This was no rote memorization on Logan's part, but true acting controlled and earthy in its groundedness. It was an exquisite thing to witness—rarely did she require notes or coaching. Emotionally, this character runs the gamut with and against her sister Henrietta. And, like Henrietta, Margaret has a "true north" from which she never strays. Logan discovered this early and never deviated from it. Graduate students and professionals don't always perform this well. It would be an absolute joy to work with her again.

Ty Hudson brought Peter Shaw to life as the love interest, the representative male oppressor and as sort of a comedic pulse. Early in the production process, the director contacted Gunderson via Facebook regarding common errors she sees in the production of

this play. Gunderson indicated Peter is not a clown but very serious—a fact usually overlooked or ignored. Hudson, while funny at appropriate moments, presented this seriousness, especially in his lines about not being cut out for the line of work he's in, how the face of the science of astronomy is changing with people like Einstein, how he's so glad to have gotten to know Henrietta. His boyish excitement—even as a scientist—makes him awkward in Hudson's portrayal, which is a completely valid choice that brings a charm to the character. Gunderson also said that Henrietta and Peter do not know they are in a love story—I believe Hudson understood this when building his character, even knowing Peter Shaw is a fictional character like Margaret. The accidental romance throws him off course; this is the source of the comedic elements that can run dangerously close to being clownish. Ultimately, Hudson balanced this with the Chauvinistic parasite eating at Peter Shaw's innards. When Hudson went to this part of the character, it was a complete departure from the lovestruck, awkward Peter. His portrayal of Shaw's willful ignorance against progressive ideas advances notions of the oppressive masculine institution refusing to accept discovery beyond the status quo much less discoveries made by women. In something of a painful moment indicative of the weakness of this sort of masculinity, Shaw—after denying the universe can be so large—admits he turned away from Henrietta at the behest of his father. Even Peter—the representative male oppressor—is oppressed by dominating masculinity. For the benefit of the story, he returns to something of his former charming self at the end of the play and takes his place among Henrietta's loved ones in their own constellation.

Hudson's energy made this character who he was. He lent both a boyish charm which any aunt or uncle would be pleased to see in a nephew as well as a rigid sophistication—a dark-turned, almost frightening selfishness. These two elements were

supercharged in the awkwardly romantic and the pragmatically ignorant elements of Peter Shaw. To stage this play again, it would be difficult not to subdue those extremes and their energy; mostly less of a goofy awkwardness in the comedic moments and slightly less priggishness in the Chauvinistic moments.

Physically, Hudson is supercharged. It is refreshing to allow an actor to simply do what he's going to do. Rarely did Hudson require physical direction; when he did, it was so nitpicky as to be almost irrelevant. In any event, direction was largely given to pull him back energy-wise; most actors are requested to give more—not the case with Hudson. May it never be said that Hudson isn't a dynamic, powerful actor. It is pleasing to work with someone as professional, energetic and talented as Hudson.

Morgan Benson had one of the most intriguing character arcs as Annie Canon, starting as she does as a dogmatic supervisor who works by the book with no ambition beyond her fastidious computing of data, ending as a pants-wearing warrior for women's suffrage and ardent cheerleader for Henrietta. Benson is a cerebral actor—she mentally digests all the facets of the character, all the blocking she receives, all the notes offered. This means that direction isn't always applied immediately; it also means that once she has dissected the information she receives, she brings a performance with a curiously intellectual, reasoned attack. This is and has been intriguing to the director, having now worked with Benson in two shows. Her vocal and physical presentation is subtle and sometimes requires percolation to let the character bubble up over time. Once she undergoes this cerebral process, the vocal and physical qualities she adds make for a grounded, true-to-life character. Ultimately, Benson brought a staunch supervisory demeanor at her character's first appearance that blossomed a bit more in each scene to be the strong and loving support for

her friend and colleague that Annie was to Henrietta. Ironically, she became perhaps the most progressive woman in the sisterhood of Henrietta, Annie and Williamina. As is true for Oetken, Benson is very emotive with her eyes, which made evident her facial gestures under a mask.

Grace Ricard playing Williamina was simply joy for a director. To begin, Ricard came into the first readthrough of the script with all her phonemic substitutions for the Scottish dialect in place, implementing them with near flawless precision. Only once did she receive a note about pronunciation and that wasn't because her substitutions were errant; rather, the director wanted to be certain the audience understood she was saying the word "sex" and not "six." She required no dialect coaching otherwise.

Though she is a young woman, Ricard has a natural ability to play strong characters in their middle age with a certain elan. She understands posture and gesticulation; when to move and when to be still. She possesses a feminine strength, a will that won't be stifled or put down, and she brings that to her characters in appropriate ways. Her comedic timing is beneficial in a role like Williamina, seeing as Will is an antithesis against Peter Shaw. This doesn't mean Will is strictly comedic; indeed, like Peter, the strength that Ricard possesses manifests beautifully against Peter in the exchange following his oppressive refusal to keep Henrietta at work on the Cepheid project—calling him a giant ass, telling him to get out, warning him not to press her. Vocally, Ricard gives the impression that Williamina just might physically remove Peter and do so deftly without effort. Similarly, though Ricard could play the caregiver easily (it's a shame her role as Maw in *Going To See The Elephant* was cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19), she also played this with intentional awkwardness as Will attempts to comfort Henrietta following the blowup with Peter.

“Strength shawled in tenderness” is a concept that comes to mind when thinking of Williamina and Ricard’s portrayal of her. While Williamina is in her 50s for this show, and while Ricard certainly played her as such, she lent a vitality that added to the litany of strong women alongside Henrietta, Annie and Margaret. Ricard played the role of Williamina and designed the set, props and projections; she had a lot of responsibilities, meeting them all satisfactorily.

The production was fortunate to receive KCACTF responses from the region as well as in the capacity of an invited production to the Region V Festival in January. Deidre Ensz-Mattox, Director of Theatre at Hutchinson Community College in Hutchinson, KS, and Rusty Ruth, Director of Theatre at Wayne State College in Wayne, NE, responded to the show via Zoom on October 17, 2020. Ensz-Mattox congratulated the company for endeavoring to do live theatre at all. The conversation began with a concern for using masks on stage—a concern that both Ensz-Mattox and Ruth agreed dissipated within about a minute of watching the show. Both agreed that the end of the show was emotional enough to draw tears from them despite trying to respond with a completely critical eye. The responders were impressed that the designs were all student responsibility and talked at length about the craftsmanship of each design area. Particularly, they appreciated that the designs all came together in a cohesive manner as if a single brain had designed everything. Notes for the scenic work included the functionality of the balanced set, the constellations on the floor tying the vertical space to the horizontal and the use of projections. Ensz-Mattox noted that some of the projections seemed unnecessary but agreed the pictures were fascinating. Regarding blocking, the responders noted the use of triangles in Act I and the use of circles in Act II. Well-timed and motivated movement lent to a sense of vitality in the

characters inside a well-used space. Costumes effectively established appropriate time and class, they said, and did not pull focus away from what is happening in the story. Ensz-Mattox indicated she might have used a costume change on Henrietta when her illness begins to overwhelm her toward the end of Act II. Ruth indicated that the lighting effectively enhanced the story without calling too much attention except when needed, like in the end of both acts. Music and sound were not overdone; Ensz-Mattox noted she enjoyed the underscoring, the use of hymns and the original compositions. Ruth said that all elements tied together called forth the concept idea of mystic science or holy science. Both spoke highly of the actors' choices in the show, calling attention to the actors' pursuit of goals, relationships, organic motivation in movement and especially listening—a facet many actors neglect. They commented positively on the director's staging, picturization—especially in poignant moments—and adherence to the natural rhythms of the script. A much-appreciated comment was on the director's adherence to a mathematical and musical precision in movement, which precision was hoped to be subconsciously noted but not consciously noticed by the audience. One of Ruth's final comments stands out—he'd like to direct the play but felt he would be restricted to staging a “poor man's version” of this production.

Response to *Silent Sky* as an invited production to the KCACTF Region V Festival 53 was offered by Kelsey Mesa, Manager of KCACTF and Theatre Education at The Kennedy Center, and Kelly Quinnett, Head of Acting at the University of Idaho and National Member at Large for KCACTF. Response was given via Zoom on January 16, 2021. Mesa and Quinnett commended the company on finding the gifts buried inside the challenges of producing a show during a pandemic. Both noted the definite chemistry

between the characters despite the social distancing and mask requirements, particularly between Henrietta and Peter, Henrietta and Margaret. They indicated that working with the masks was quite successful and that actors' diction was as audiences would expect without masks. Many of the comments offered by Ruth and Ensz-Mattox were echoed by Mesa and Quinnett, with Quinnett noting she cried watching the video of the performance.

To conclude, the *Silent Sky* company went through much but carried on enthusiastically; the struggles of the pandemic, including illnesses afflicting the company, were felt by everyone involved. This said, *Silent Sky* came through the process, received admirable criticism from KCACTF responders and was invited as a production to KCACTF Region V Festival 53. Sound Designer Vondra's sound design advanced to the KCACTF National Festival; the director received a directing commendation at Festival 53. The dedication of the cast, crew and design team kept the show going when it felt hopeless; the support of faculty and leadership buoyed the production and kept the team focused and optimistic. Through the process, possibility emerged at every problem area. Like Henrietta's situation, it seemed appropriate not to dwell on afflictions but to ask what would come next. The company—like our protagonist—constantly awaited the next opportunity, to be “sent more sky” as Henrietta would say. The perception really is that through tribulation and work, wonder got us there.

CHAPTER 5

PROCESS DEVELOPMENT

It is a cruel thing to be an artist confined to 9-to-5 humdrummery. It is unbearable knowing one is not honoring the path he has chosen in artistic undergraduate work and degrees. There comes a time when the futility of waiting to see what happens becomes a death process; artistic mortality stares back at you from bookshelves, notebooks and thoughts of accomplishing nothing.

The director joined the Master of Fine Arts in Directing Program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, in effort to fulfill a long-held desire to work as a professional in the theatre and to escape the monotony of a career that was slowly eroding him to a creative stub. Having attained a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing and in Theatre but not affording any honor to those degrees, the director needed to determine how best to seek a life useful and advance his artistic ambitions. In this chapter, the director will discuss how the coursework and productions in this program have assisted in reaching the next step of these goals.

While the director did not select *Stupid Fucking Bird* by Aaron Posner as his minor project, an influx of graduate directors put this fascinating retelling of Chekhov's *The Seagull* on his desk. The process was doubtlessly one of learning—working under the guidance of Paul J. Hustoles with a production team whose abilities I did not know in a program with unfamiliar processes created no small amount of stress. The first lesson in this process was to inform the student designers of the overall concept and let them determine how to

interpret and synthesize that data into a design. Managing expectations, knowing when to speak and when to let the designer speak, intervening where appropriate and getting out of the way when necessary were valuable lessons. Similarly, acclimating to the various level of abilities in the actors cast in the play was challenging. Actors with more than a decade of professional experience and actors with very little experience seasoned the cast; leading the performers through rehearsals toward a cohesive performance was daunting but satisfying. All of this acclimation in a process that begun a week or two into the program felt like a baptism by fire—in many ways, it has been shared, that is the point.

More than a year later, the director's major project (and first chosen one) was *Going To See The Elephant*. With a more acclimated position in the program, the director went into the production understanding those things he did not for the minor project; he likewise had gained an understanding through coursework and experience of the normal processes in the program. Production meetings ran jointly with *Doll's House Part 2* as both productions were being done in rep. From concept to casting, the director felt in control and ready to work. Once rehearsals began, the director was able to communicate and implement his vision with the actors and enjoyed a fruitful process that would have culminated in a well-crafted story; the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled this a week before tech rehearsals began. Overall, this affirmed the standard production processes in the director's own; likewise, the work done with actors in rehearsals was of a caliber significantly higher than in the minor project, having a better understanding of coaching actors of varying degrees of ability.

Between these minor and major projects, the director played the role of Siward in *Macbeth* directed by Heather E. Hamilton, Frodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* directed by

Paul J. Hustoles, Warnie Lewis in *Shadowlands* directed by Trevor Belt, and Pulitzer in *Newsies* directed by Hustoles.

Macbeth provided the director with his first foray into acting Shakespeare in a fully-mounted production; also, his first foray with broadswords on stage and not in a studio space. Being present only in the final scenes of the show, the director took the opportunity during rehearsals to watch Hamilton's process, to move around the house investigating picturization and composition, to occasionally ask questions if the moment seemed right for them.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame provided the director with insight into directing musicals with efficiency and melding representational aspects with presentational aspects. Hustoles moves quickly and efficiently; he expects the same from his actors. This was also a valuable show for lessons on composition and picturization, simple and efficient blocking and managing performers. Much the same was true of *Newsies*.

Shadowlands allowed the director a needed reprieve from the presentational aspects of musical acting and back to the representational acting of a straight play. It was also nice to work in summer stock theatre, this being part of Highland Summer Theatre, with a professional director. Belt has immense experience as a professional director and it was pleasing to experience his Socratic approach to actor coaching. Also, the ritual of human processes was inherent in this show, with Warnie and Jack going through many of the same motions day-by-day (Warnie served morning tea and delivered the mail to Jack's desk before retiring to the easy chair to read the paper in two scenes). The ritual nature of humans, character arcs, happenings and of course composition and picturization were important to note in this production.

Coursework has reinstituted some valuable lessons the director has applied over many years as well as introduced him to more than he expected. The Advanced Directing I and II courses provided reminders of standard directing fundamentals, afforded opportunity for scene work, enhanced directing vocabulary, introduced different directing approaches and acting coaching methods. In Advanced Directing II with Hustoles, the director first had opportunity to direct a scene from *Art* by Yasmina Reza with discussion following on “high comedy” versus farce, actor coaching, blocking and timing. Directing comedy has always been a weak point for the director and this lesson did not solidify his confidence. The director took this as a lesson in receiving criticism. Second, the director staged a scene from *An Incident at Vichy* by Arthur Miller with discussion following on picturization, costuming, style and blocking. Other than production value, which was destroyed in discussion, the remaining elements in discussion are sound in the director’s opinion. The director maintained his opinion that production value in a classroom should be expected to be minimal—suspension of disbelief should be acceptable here. Finally, the director staged a scene from *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare with discussion following on composition and blocking, style and actor coaching; this was the scene discussion with which the director learned most with no overreaching negative criticism.

Advanced Directing I with Hamilton re-iterated production meeting standards and practices, allowed for graduate student lecture on noteworthy directors and allowed for the direction of one scene. This would have been more if not for the COVID-19 pandemic cancelling on-campus coursework for the Spring 2020 semester. The director staged a scene from *Jesus Hopped the A Train* by Stephen Adly Guirgis with discussion following on actor coaching, picturization and blocking. Lessons taken from this scene revolved mostly around

communicating with actors with a limited skillset and fostering an understanding of character, intent, motivation and subtext. The director composed a presentation on the celebrated Peter Brook, which would have been presented to the class had not the pandemic changed the course of the semester. The director also wrote a grant proposal to the Minnesota State Arts Board as a project following the pandemic shutdown of campus.

The Acting Techniques course re-introduced some known techniques and introduced new techniques to the director. Taught by Hustoles, this was a forceful and informative look into multiple techniques. Of particular note, techniques involving anthropomorphization, centers, types of gesticulation and inner and outer masks fascinated the director—he has tried to apply these to his acting experiences with some implementation as a director when appropriate. Continued development of the director's vocabulary was another benefit from the course, as were pedagogical methods for teaching such a course.

Theatre Speech II, taught by Hustoles, offered the director insight into the physiology of using the voice. The use of vocal qualities, lessons on anatomy and initial lessons on the International Phonetic Alphabet were new to the director and prepared him for more work in the Dialects I and II courses, taught by Hustoles and Matthew Caron. Together, the speech and dialects courses offered the director an enormous portion of what he has learned about his own voice and how to train others to manipulate their voices for character work. In the dialects courses, the director learned 10 different dialects and is quite confident in his ability to implement and teach these dialects to actors in stage productions or in the classroom. Following the second semester of his dialect training, the director felt proficient in the International Phonetic Alphabet and is confident in his ability to work as a dialects coach; he hopes to add more dialects to his repertoire through private study. These

were three favorite courses for the director and the ones from which he learned the most as all three of them were new areas of study for him.

Theatre History I and II, taught by Caron and Hamilton respectively, refreshed the director's previous study and introduced historical topics either forgotten or not previously studied. Most fascinating were the lessons in Theatre History I, going back to the foundations of theatre and moving through time through eras that were important in shaping theatre as we know it today. The reading of multiple plays from different ancient eras was most beneficial, and lessons on each era's contribution to the evolution of theatre were most insightful. Theatre History II provided more insight into the practitioners important to theatre following the English Restoration through contemporary times. The director had opportunity to lead discussion groups of undergraduates and delivered a lecture on the contributions of August Strindberg. Following both these classes—as names, dates and titles are not easily remembered by him—the director compiled two large notebooks of his notes from class, additional notes from textbooks and plays, illustrations and diagrams of the information learned in class. These notebooks will be most valuable in taking the lessons learned to students elsewhere and will no doubt receive additional material over time.

Theory and Criticism, taught by Hamilton, exposed the director to theories and ideas from important thespians, poets and philosophers from across the ages. Many of these individuals—Nietzsche and Coleridge, to name two—were not known as theatre theorists previously. The only negative about this course was the lack of proper time to completely digest all the material and ideas from these many theorists and the director is inspired to continue his research into the theories discussed in the course. Truly, a wealth of knowledge and insight was gleaned from these lessons. Robust classroom discussion on the approaches

and perspectives of brilliant thinkers made this enjoyable, requiring students—the director included—to take inventory of their own ideas about theatre.

Theatre Research advanced the necessity for the director to mine all resources to apply to research. Taught by Hamilton, the course required the writing of five five-page research papers. This, more so than writing one massive paper, assisted the director in understanding and firmly placing MLA format into his mind—the proper use of citations, listing of works cited and works consulted, for example. As in the Theory and Criticism course, Theatre Research advanced the director's understanding that sources, ideas and practices in theatre can come from resources in research can come from multiple fields, people and places. The course also assisted the director to realize that he is not confined to the creative aspects of writing but also has the necessary tools for more expository and academic writing.

Another Hamilton-taught class, Dramaturgy was a fascinating delving into all the aspects of a play, playwright and production. Literally everything surrounding a play needs to be considered: the play itself and its creation by a playwright; the staging of the play by a company; the societal mores and events happening during the play's creation and production; the incidents going on within the play; and everything else that can be imagine which touches a play. This was a course that could easily be split into multiple levels (Dramaturgy I, II, III, IV—even more) because there really isn't an end to the research possibilities attached to a play. This course served as the director's first true research-based class as a graduate student and was one of the most fulfilling. Tennessee Williams's *Night of the Iguana* was the play chosen by the director for this course's research and opened up a completely new insight for him into the playwright's life and struggle, the play itself and the

socio-economic impacts of the relationship between Mexico and the U.S. after World War

II. Most importantly, the course showed the director that research need not be taxing but can be extraordinarily enjoyable.

The director enjoyed four Design for Directors courses. These courses aim to offer directors an insight into the world of the designer and included disciplines in Sound, Costume, Scenery and Lighting design. The courses were taught by Professors George Grubb, David McCarl, John Paul and Steven Smith respectively. While none of the courses made the director feel as though he had mastered them, they all offered him an opportunity to work as a designer in the classroom and exposed him to the practices and theories of a designer in each field. Following the scenic design course, the director was solicited by Paul to design the scenery for Sarah Honerman's minor directing project *Desdemona* by Paula Vogel—an experience that will add a healthy addition to his talents as a rounded theatre artist. Following these courses and experiences, the director feels confident in his ability to work in these various areas and to communicate effectively with professional or student designers in his capacity as a director. To that note, the Designer/Director Communication course taught by Hustoles added to the director's effectiveness in conveying and receiving ideas from designers. In that course, the director had opportunity to study communication from a director's perspective. He was able to serve as a director and designer for each of the design areas aforementioned; class discussion from directors, designers and technical directors enlightened the director on perceptions and needs from each area. As a project, he reached out to MSU Theatre and Dance alumni John Heimbuch, playwright and director of Walking Shadow Theatre Company in Minneapolis, to discuss his preferred communication methods with a production team. These five courses will prove most beneficial to the

director in an academic or professional setting when considering design options and working with professional or student designers.

Stage Combat, taught by David McCarl, proved one of the director's favorite classes. Unarmed combat, quarterstaff and broadsword combat techniques were learned; additionally, rapier techniques were slated but abandoned due to the closing of on-campus classes at the end of the semester. Nonetheless, the director's previously learned unarmed techniques were refreshed, and his limited experience with broadsword technique was enhanced. Quarterstaff combat was completely new to the director and perhaps enjoyed most. Some tumbling exercises were available but the director's physical restrictions prevented complete integration of these lessons. Overall, the techniques taught in this course allow the director no small level of comfort in directing fight choreography and teaching the same techniques to actors—it is hoped that rapier work might be gained from other resources and, perhaps, work towards certification through the Society of American Fight Directors can begin in the near future.

The Theatre Management course taught by Hustoles offered the director a broad overview of the business aspects of professional and academic theatre. Theatre hierarchies and business practices were taught and illustrated through the use of textbook, lecture and infinitely entertaining stories from Hustoles, who never runs out of material either as a teacher or as a conversationalist. Multiple projects required detailed budgets, staffing, union requirements, investors and venues. The use of multimedia presentations in class by students was most insightful as the director learned not only about the business of theatre but using technology in presentations. This was also the course wherein the director received perhaps his highest praise from Hustoles, who shared in an email that he had

received the highest grade in the class on the final project. Hustoles noted “I was shocked too! Well, not really. You are one smart pile of...cookies!”

In the current semester, the director is taking an Acting with Masks topic course under professor Vladimir Rovinsky. The course is a highly movement-based class that has further enhanced the director’s ability to use the body in acting. While certain physical restrictions have limited the director’s complete participation in the course, he has strived to participate as fully as possible with the implementation of knee braces and pads when necessary. The course has shown the director a glimpse into the world of Lecoq mask techniques, Chekhovian acting techniques and vocabulary, various types of acting with masks and introduced literature not previously known to him. He is also attending the Patrick Page Studio online seminar on Acting *Hamlet* as his internship and has enjoyed ample opportunity as an auditor to watch Broadway’s most prolific contemporary classical actor of villains teach and train actors on breaking down Shakespearian text and applying acting techniques to the material. Detailed work with scansion, thematic elements of the material, historical elements of the play and its production and vocabulary are a few of the lessons Page imparts to the participants. This seminar will be most valuable to the director in the analysis of Shakespearian and other texts from previous eras of theatre; likewise, to the implementation of text analysis, proper adherence to scansion and application of acting techniques for professional or student actors. The director is also auditing the Musical Theatre Acting course taught by Professor Nick Wayne and Graduate Assistant David Loudermilk. While the director is comfortable with his ability as a musical actor, he chose to audit the course to observe pedagogical practices useful in the teaching of such a course in the future. Actor coaching with attention to physical acting and vocal technique for the

singer are the principal focus; the use of technology in the classroom for the playing of music tracks provide valuable lessons for the teacher in such a class. Certainly, exposure to musical theatre literature from classic and contemporary musicals is a large field to be mined and this course allows for that exposure.

The director has participated in six semesters of Private Voice taught by Wayne. As a singer for many years who has enjoyed multiple roles in musical productions over the years, the director has sought to keep voice lessons as part of his regular routine in order to expand his repertoire and knowledge of musical literature, apply lessons on vocal techniques, keep the voice healthy and vibrant and expand his vocal range. To this end he has been able to compile a respectable repertoire of material, increase his understanding of the voice and how to use it, practice healthy vocal habits and increase the top end of his range significantly. Regardless of the director's future, he intends to continue voice lessons as a basso cantante/baritenor regardless of the future avenues he travels.

Additionally, the director was fortunate to be able to take the Playwriting course with Professor Bruce Jones. Having previously enjoyed mild success as a playwright in the Mitchell, SD area, the director continued work in playwriting exercises and discussions with graduate and undergraduate students. Two plays were created as projects in this class: the ten-minute *Night Ride* about two brothers taking a drive on the night before their youngest brother's funeral; and *Taken Under*, a full-length play about a mortician struggling in a marriage gone sour with a daughter afflicted by a terminal illness. Both received excellent comments from the students and from Jones, with Jones indicating he'd like to see both plays on their feet in performance. Importantly—as learned in Hamilton's Dramaturgy class—extensive research was required for these plays. Of most interest were the series of

interviews the director had with two funeral directors from two different funeral homes—one in Sioux Falls, SD, and one in Minneapolis—on the rigors of funeral work and the balance of work and home life. Valuable insight was gained into the processes of a funeral home embalming room, relationships with clients and the stresses such work puts on a funeral director and her or his family. These conversations further colored the obvious notion that joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, the sublime and the grotesque reside so close together—often close enough that a razor blade cannot separate them.

For graduate assistantship requirements, the director spent year one of the MFA program working 20 hours a week in the scene shop. Subsequent to this, he worked 10 hours per week in the scene shop for four semesters. During this time, as a scene shop supervisor, the director honed his supervisory and managerial skills with undergraduates and learned valuable skills in communication, assignment delegation and project evaluation. He also continued to hone his skills as a painter and carpenter and has mastered the use of several hand tools and power tools. This experience has made the director confident in his abilities to read ground plans and elevations in order to build a set, to assign tasks to others in a cohesive manner best suited to achieve quick results and to lead a team. He has also spent four semesters of his graduate assistantship hours teaching Acting for Everyone. Two of those semesters were in the acting studio; one semester was taught in a FlexSync environment with some students live and others on video; one semester was taught on video in an asynchronous manner. These courses allowed the director to further develop his pedagogy in teaching the basics of acting; the FlexSync and asynchronous semesters developed the director's ability to teach a hands-on physical course through technology without the benefit of being in the room with actors and without using physical contact of

any manner. It is the hope of all that the pandemic will soon end and a return to the normalcy of life comes quickly; as we still have no timeline for this, it is important to have those skills from a FlexSync and an asynchronous classroom environment.

It is important to note that the director spent 18 years after attaining his undergraduate degrees working to eliminate debt in the hopes of advancing his artistic interests. Financial obligations, the corkscrewed road of life and no small amount of self-doubt restrained him from his goals; they did, however, allow him to become a successfully-published poet and poetry editor, musician and now—finally—a disciple of the art of theatre with a different sort of degree in life experience.

Also worth mention, the first role undertaken by the director was an apple seed in a Missoula Children's Theatre production of *Johnny Appleseed* in Fort Pierre, SD, at the age of seven. With sporadic years of theatrical inactivity, he has been involved in one or two productions a year on average since that time, totaling more than 35 years of work in the theatre.

These experiences gleaned from the short time spent at the Minnesota State University, Mankato, Department of Theatre and Dance, in conjunction with experiences over the course of his artistic life, will provide the director with knowledge, skills and desire to work successfully in an academic or professional environment. This life embarked upon is more voluptuous than the 9-to-5 humdrumery previously mentioned, and the director now feels empowered to honor his previous work with a positive outlook on what other possibilities await. The Department of Theatre and Dance has instilled in the director a renewed vigor for the art of theatre, passion for learning and teaching and joy amid the buzz of artists, craftspeople and students. Onward.

APPENDIX A

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS



“The Stars Are Music”

Foreground: Henrietta Leavitt (Lindsey Oetken)

Background (partially concealed, at piano): Margaret Leavitt (Via Logan)



“Play!”

Foreground: Margaret (Via Logan)

Background: Henrietta (Lindsey Oetken)



“It’s a Whole Other World Up There”

From left: Henrietta (Lindsey Oetken) and Margaret (Via Logan)



“Just to be With You in the Widest World”

Henrietta (Lindsey Oetken)

Foreground: Peter Shaw (Ty Hudson)



“Time is Elastic; Space is Part of Time”

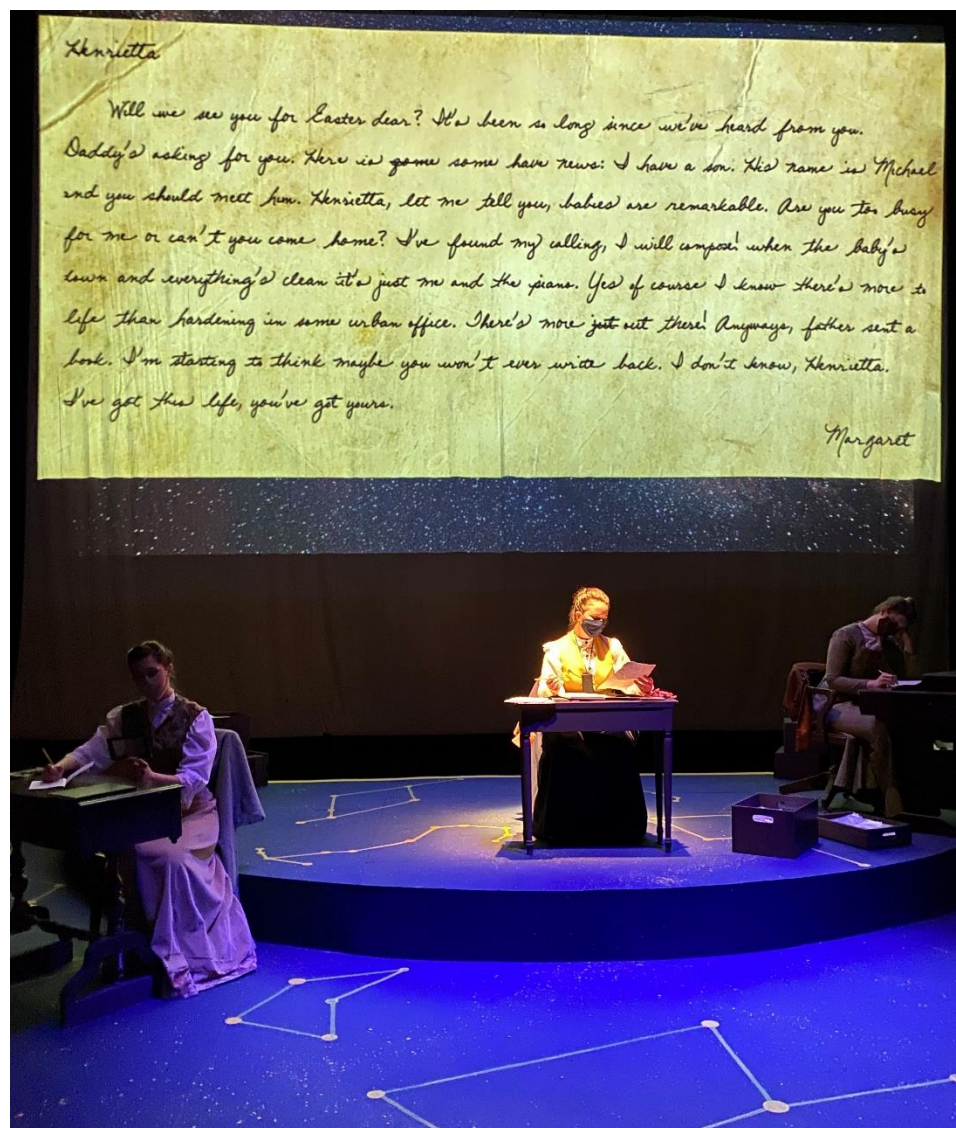
Peter (Ty Hudson)



“Do the Work You’re Assigned”

Annie Jump Cannon (Morgan Benson)

Background: Henrietta (Lindsey Oetken) and Williamina Fleming (Grace Ricard)



“I’ve Got This Life, You’ve Got Yours”

Left to Right: Annie (Morgan Benson), Henrietta (Lindsey Oetken) and
Williamina (Grace Ricard)



“Are You Made Nervous...?”

Left: Peter (Ty Hudson)

Right: Williamina (Grace Ricard)



“Is She Sleeping?”

Left to Right: Peter (Ty Hudson), Henrietta (Lindsey Oetken) and
Williamina (Grace Ricard)



“Your Face, My God!”

Peter (Ty Hudson) and Henrietta (Lindsey Oetken)



"Measured In Light"

Left: Margaret (Via Logan)

Right: Annie (Morgan Benson)

Center: Henrietta (Lindsey Oetken)

APPENDIX B

PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

Apr. 6, 2020	First concept meeting
Apr. 13	Second production meeting
Apr. 20	Third production meeting
Apr. 20	Preliminary Ground Plan Due
Aug. 24	Auditions/Casting
Apr. 27	Set and Costume Designs Due
Aug. 17	Sound Plot Due, Light Plot Due
Aug. 24	Set/Prop build begins, Costume build begins, Light hang
Aug. 26	Rehearsals Begin
Aug. 31	Light Focus
Sept. 8	Publicity Photo Call
Sept. 10	Light/Sound Tech
Sept. 11	First Tech
Sept. 12	First Dress
Sept. 15	Console Out/House Clean
Sept. 16	<i>Silent Sky</i> opens
Sept. 17	Production Photo Call
Sept. 19	Close/Strike

APPENDIX C

REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

DATE/TIME		WORK	CALLED	NOTES
WEEK 1				
M 08/24	4p	Auditions		Set/Prop build, Costume build, begin Light hang
T 08/25	635p	First Read; Table work	Full Cast	
W 08/26	635p	Blocking	Full Cast	
T 08/27	635p	Work Act I	Full Cast	
F 08/28	635p	Work Act II	Full Cast	
WEEK 2				
(We will begin working through rehearsals using French scenes. Each rehearsal will begin with those scenes with the most cast members; cast members will be released once their scenes have been worked through.)				
S 08/30	635p	Work Act I	Full Cast	Off Book
M 08/31	635p 9p	Work Act II Intimacy	Full Cast Henrietta/Peter	Light focus
T 09/01	635p	Act I Stop/Go	Full Cast	
W 09/02	635p	Troubleshoot I	TBA	
T 09/03	635p	Act II Stop/Go	Full Cast	
F 09/04	635P	Troubleshoot II	TBA	

WEEK 3

M 09/07	635p	Run Show	Full Cast	Design run?
N.B.—designers are always welcome to attend rehearsals; let the PSM know if you're planning to be there.				

T 09/08	635p	Troubleshoot	Full Cast	Publicity photo call
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W 09/09	635p	Troubleshoot	Full Cast	
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T 09/10	635p	Run Show	Full Cast	Light/Sound tech
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F 09/11	635p	Run Show	Full Cast	First tech
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WEEK 4

S 09/12	TBA	TBA	TBA	TBA
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S 09/13	TBA	First Dress	Full Cast	
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M 09/14	635p	Second Dress	Full Cast	
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T 09/15	635p	Majors' Preview	Full Cast	
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W 09/16	635p	SHOW		
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T 09/17	635p	SHOW		Production photo call
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F 09/18	635p	SHOW		
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S 09/19	12p	SHOW (Matinee)		
	635p	SHOW (Evening)		

S 09/20	12p	SHOW (Matinee)		
		STRIKE		

APPENDIX D

DIRECTOR'S PROGRAM NOTE

Astronomer Henrietta Leavitt, kept at a desk looking at photographs of the stars, was denied the tools of her fellow male astronomers. Yet her discoveries helped shape our understanding of the universe and our place in it. Lauren Gunderson celebrates Leavitt's astonishing contributions in *Silent Sky*.

Leavitt—a true, historical character—moves through reality and fantasy as ideas blossom through hard work. She is assisted by Williamina Fleming and Annie Cannon—also noteworthy but unsung scientists of import. Peter Shaw and Margaret Leavitt—Gunderson's fictional “gifts” to Henrietta—offer an earthy humanness to the play.

Some things change and some require constant work. We are using masks and social distancing on stage. In Leavitt's time, the Spanish Flu required similar practices. Consider what has or has not changed since Leavitt's time. The 19th Amendment is only 100 years old; the Civil Rights movement even younger. The struggle continues. How does an oppressor contain the human spirit if we push forward in spite of him, her or them? Discovery is but one of many important rewards.

APPENDIX E

CONCEPT NOTES

Henrietta: Because the real point...is seeing something bigger. And knowing we're a small part of it, if we're lucky. In the end, that's a life well-lived.

STAR FIELD

The wonder of the universe coalescing and being a part of human life

“Mystic Science,” “Holy Science”

In and out of times and locations, sometimes from one line to the next

Representational and Presentational acting (some breaking of the fourth wall)

We are of the stars and will return to the stars—Henrietta becomes a star at her time of death

The idea of the Aleph (Jorge Luis Borges)—all points of the universe are connected at one point at any given time or place. *We are all connected.*

BIG IDEAS

Women's achievement usurped and reclaimed

intelligence/wisdom/achievement

suffrage/equality

the women do the work anyway—PASSION in spite of oppression; doing

the work not because it's the job, but because you must

Thinking bigger than possible

the vast possibility of DISCOVERY

We are Stardust

nothing is too important or too insignificant

THE CONCEPT

“Henrietta Leavitt helped map the distances in space, and paradoxically brought us closer to understanding our own place in the universe.” Kerry Reid, *Chicago Tribune*, April 4, 2017

“How vast and beautiful it all is...Because wonder will always get us there...those of us who insist that there is much more beyond ourselves. And I do. And there’s a reason we measure it all in light.”

The last words of Henrietta in the play sum up, scientifically or esoterically as you like, the entire concept.

Human endeavor and understanding

We are one with the universe

Light is the essence of everything

APPLYING THE CONCEPT

Scenic

Very simple, representational set

Colorful paint treatments—think Universe, even on floors, structures

Zodiacal symbols, astronomical equations, names of stars and galaxies,

included in the design (paint, whatever)

Levels—use of platforms to distinguish different areas and situations

i.e. Perhaps the ocean liner is a taller platform upstage; perhaps the house in Massachusetts is on the stage floor downstage

Be conscious of how we will make the stars/cosmos meld with the set

Projections—I see the possibility of projecting images from the cosmos, perhaps the night sky above the ocean liner, maybe the Wisconsin home place. Consider this—certainly, we will need elements from the last few pages of the play to be projected over the stage and house.

Suggestions from the script:

Five very basic settings

The Star Field

Harvard College Observatory Second-Floor Offices

Leavitt Home, Wisconsin

An Ocean Liner in the Atlantic Ocean

Henrietta's Home, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Additionally

“Letter” or “Telegram” appearances

Margaret occasionally appears via letters or telegrams

A specific space/lighting/sound when this happens

Finale—the dead characters in the cosmos (Henrietta becomes a star)

Lights

Omnipresent stars ranging from one to infinity

The colors of the cosmos—look to nebulae, star systems, galaxies

“Magical” transitions and effects

The ocean and the night sky (ocean liner)

Office—think early 20th century office surrounded by the universe (possible idea—a planetarium)

Finale—the characters become stars, the entire stage and everything covered in the images of outer space; stars everywhere

Sound

Music

www.dramatists.com *Silent Sky* page

examples of original music for the play

Possibly using this music for the production? Frank?

Original compositions otherwise?

Designer/composer or working with a composer?

Margaret and Henrietta both appear to play the piano at times

Songs, scales, individual notes

The hearing aid

Henrietta occasionally removes the hearing aid and the sounds of everything around her dulls—what ideas do you have?

Ambient noise of space (even though space is silent...what do you imagine?)

Ambient noise of an ocean liner at night (the water, the ship, possibly a flirtatious young couple, etc.)

Costume

Looking for realistic period clothing/hair/makeup

Some special pieces like the suffrage sash

Of note:

Henrietta's hearing aid

Annie's pants in final scenes

Colors that would be realistic for the period but which will work
harmoniously with scenic and lighting

Properties

Letter (period stationery pg. 10)

Glass plates/star spankers (spanker reference pg. 19)

Photographic plates the size of a window pane

negative images of the night sky (stars as black dots/smudges)

n.b. one of these is broken in every performance

—safety

—practicality/cleaned up by actors on stage

<http://tdc-www.harvard.edu/plates/gallery>

Markers to label stars on plates/notebooks/pencils/pens

Wadded-up paper ball pg. 27 (office paper from a desk)

Book/sweaters pg. 27

Suffrage pamphlets pg. 56

Package containing book of poems pg. 58

Ballot box/ballots pg. 61

This list may—probably will—be augmented as we go. Not a huge issue
now, but be advised.

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